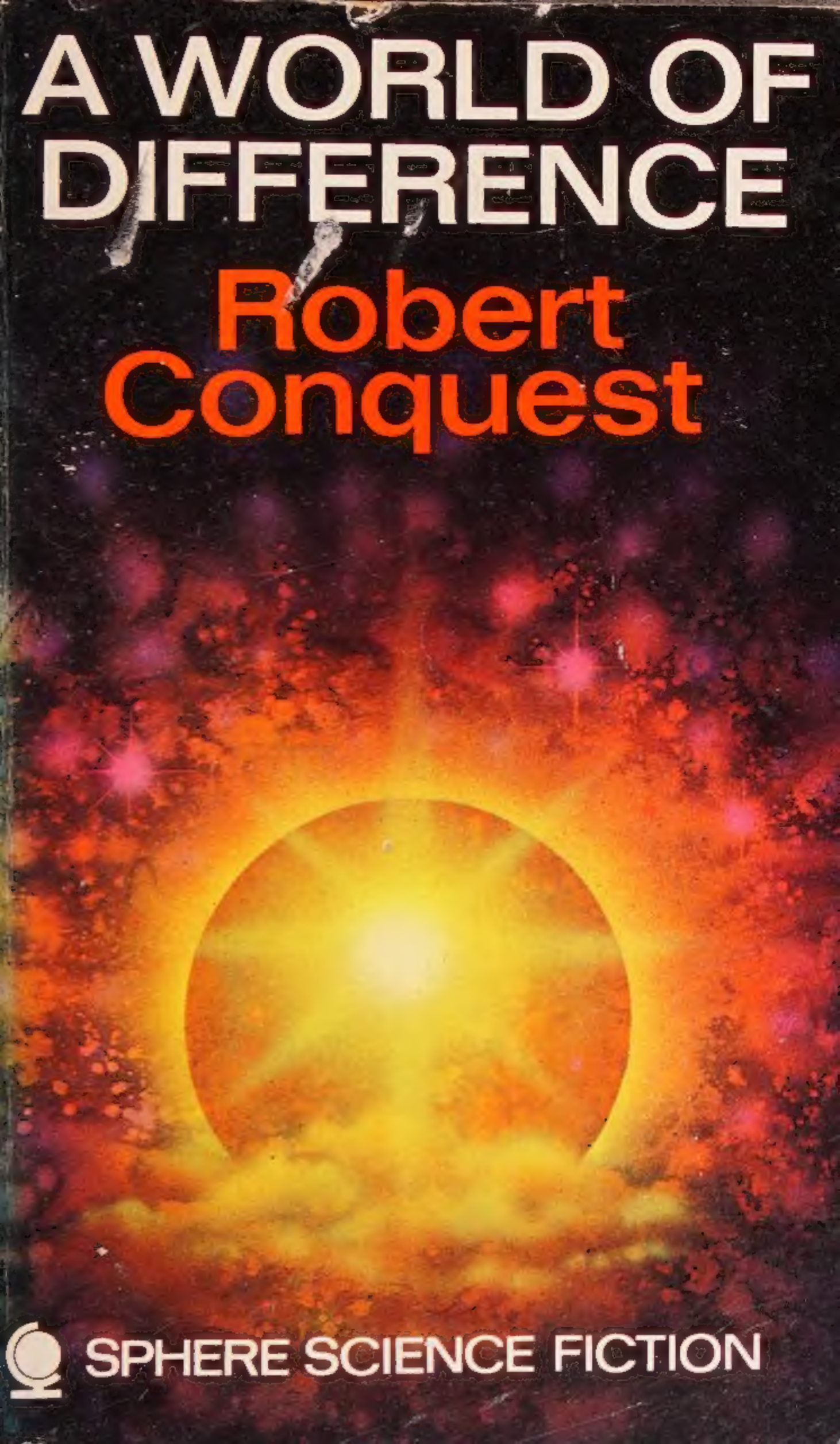
A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

Robert Conquest



SPHERE SCIENCE FICTION

In the free world of the future, many people are uneasy about the government's psychological power to control, even benevolently, its citizens' upbringing.

Four friends, an artist, a scientist, an administrator, and an amorist, each find their own novel and surpising solutions to the problem of how to retain independence of mind and action in a world where conformity has reached way out beyond just one planet . . .

First U.K. publication

A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

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ROBERT CONQUEST

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CHAPTER ONE

Plunge, lured by a softening eye
Or by a touch or a sigh
Into the labyrinth of another's being.

As often before the words of the poet went through Martin Stahlberg's head. This time he smiled to think that the plunge, toward the waiting Mireille, was quite literal.

His altitude was about eight hundred kilometres; the little stratoyacht fell freely through the parabola which would put him into the atmosphere somewhere over the Aegean.

Space has its magnificences. Seen from a fair-sized porthole, like the *Nereid*'s, better still from the great windows of an astroliner, and best of all right outside in a spacesuit, the vision of hard diamond stars, the general feeling of being struck dumb in a brilliant cold vista of infinity has an almost shocking emotional effect. It is an entirely special beauty, a revelation all of its own. In fact, the Mystic Experience Investigation sponsored by the Institute of General Semantics back in the eighties had used it as one of its key stimuli.

Everyone should experience it once. But after a while you miss the richness and variety of the Earth. It is like trying to live in Vicenza, among perfect proportions. Or (more apt) in a museum of abstract art.

Space was also, Martin thought, a good lesson on a different plane altogether—that of physical intuition. People used to variable gravity fields, or indeed to their total absence, gained a direct feeling of one aspect of the nature of the universe unobtainable by those who unconsciously took the equations of movement on earth as immutable. Playing billiards on the concave tables of the space-station, made dynamically equiva-

lent to Earth ones by the station's spin, or performing one's necessary actions floating in free fall, eliminated a certain parochialism from the nervous system.

Martin himself had seen enough of space. True, he had only been to the main space-station—a fine entertainment centre with its restaurants, dance floors and viewrooms—and to the Moon. And he had once spent a pleasant week-end with a girl in the *Nereid*, circling the Earth on a trans-polar orbit. But that time the main external interest had still been the Earth, spread in its seasons below them. And most of the interest had been inside at that.

No, his main interests were under that thin film of air. This reminded him that he had forgotten to get a present for Mireille. What could be done?

Loosening his straps he leant forward and opened the drawer where he had stowed the portrait Custis had done of him; though he had a fairly definite feeling that it was not the sort of present Mireille liked—her line was probably jewels—the rarest of all, no doubt, black pearls, Mercurian ice-opals, Martian greenstones (really a sort of vegetable excretion of ingested sand) and so on. Still, Custis was a fair painter, and, what was more to the point, one she would have heard admired.

Stahlberg pulled out the little canvas and looked at it. At least they had managed to prevent Hayakawa painting whiskers on it at a rather late stage in the dinner. And actually it was rather a good painting, even under the mixture of artificial light and rotating filtered sun-glare that now illuminated the cabin.

Then he had another look at the portrait. What he really didn't like about it was the air of vapid dissipation which Custis had somehow got into it. No doubt the serious and single-minded painter saw Stahlberg's varied sex-life, and his attempt to be knowledgeable about everything, as a trifle superficial—but not to this extent, surely.

On the other hand the dissipation, and perhaps even the conceit, raised its value as a present for Mireille, perhaps?

He looked at the representation—the long head with its grey eyes and coarse tawny hair, with the puckering round the lips and eyes, was reasonably portrayed. Perhaps he had been idealizing his own view of himself too much and could only see faults in a perfectly fair delineation.

Anyhow, that Custis respected his intellect, to some extent at least, he happened to know. It had not been Custis but Hayakawa and Vlakhov who had coined for Stahlberg, rather unkindly, the jeering epithet 'Pammath,' meaning know-all. It was formed on the analogy of polymath, which was certainly a favourite Stahlberg word in his ceaseless agitation to stop people of great intelligence in special fields being complacent about their ignorance in others. 'All-rounder' was another: and it had to be admitted that the various books Stahlberg had written to this theme had had a good reception, and even some sort of effect.

Custis hadn't got his looks quite right. He had probably known him too long. They were both in their early forties now. In an earlier age of physiological ignorance they would already have been starting to age. As it was they were physically still in their young prime. Just the same, the years had some effect: girls always seemed able to guess one's age, more or less. It was probably psychological—habits of talk, facial expressions, the look in one's eyes. Stahlberg liked to think of himself as good-looking, of course, but also as 'grizzled.' (In fact he had once managed to get the word included in his description on an identity card back in the eighties, at a time when, just after the war, they were still in use.)

He must now be almost over the Atlantic coast of North Africa. At this rate he would be about an hour and a half late for Mireille whatever he did.

It was curious to think that the three men he had been with, his old comrades of the war, were all distinguished figures in their own fields. In fact, of them all, he himself was the only one not to rate that adjective. It was true that he too was well known in his way, through his multifarious books and articles. But Custis' rather gloomy seriousness went better with a solid reputation. Not that the articles weren't good—he should start calling them 'essays.' He began to recite a bit to himself from the one which had appeared the previous week in the magazine *Selene*,

"If we wish to feel ourselves back in the mental climate of Britain in the fifties, we cannot do better than read these reviews. Remembering that they were intended for people who prided themselves on their capacity to reason and to judge, we are astonished to find to what extent their arguments

are a mixture of bare assertion, thinly disguised emotionalism and straight logical fallacies. For instance . . ." From here on, of course, it had written itself.

He looked at himself in the polished enamel of the roof dome, but it did not give a clear image. Thinking that he had anyhow better tidy himself up while still in free fall, as he would be unable to when strapped in for the landing, he decided to go to the cramped cubicle which was his dressing-room, and where there was a mirror. But, unstrapping the belt too early, he drifted across the cabin to the main port, where the scene held him.

The view of the Earth from this height, especially when it is late afternoon or mid-morning at the point below, is held by some connoisseurs to be the most magnificent there is, better even than the great sweeping fullness from five thousand kilometres. It is low enough to see the distinct colours and contours in all their astonishing wealth, yet not so far down as to lose much of the periphery of vision in the blur of a too oblique view through atmosphere and cloud.

Below him and to the north lay the Straits of Gibraltar, ruffled by a visible current passing into the Mediterranean. To the east stretched North Africa, green round the great Sahara Lakes but still glittering red and yellow where the influence of the new waters had not yet reached. Beyond lay the whole Mediterranean as far as Crete.

Little cloud flecked the old world's afternoon and what there was did not fall into the regular lanes and whorls the pattern of the weather which distract attention when seen from a greater altitude. To the north-east successive cones of Alps and Pyrenees flickered like ice-opals, as the reflection changed continually with the angle of ship's movement.

Stahlberg thought he could see a golden tint in the green round Elche it must be the time of the orange harvest now.

There is no space-station as low as this, and so the view is always one which changes not merely from the observer's course across it, but also in his movement toward or away from it. As the *Nereid* dropped rapidly in, the landscape slipped away under Stahlberg and at the same time grew visibly. A small storm south of the Balearics, at first just a whirl of whiteness, revealed round its edges a white of different

texture—from miles of broken waves foaming on the bluish darkness of the sea.

It was breath-takingly beautiful. Stahlberg felt the usual pangs of admiration, of love. And if his breath was taken rather less than was normal for him it was for obvious reasons; his concentration of thought in these matters was elsewhere, on the girl Mireille, the anticipation of whose not entirely comparable beauty caught at his throat more strongly still. This was in accordance, in any case, with the theory he had finally proved, to his own satisfaction at least, in his recent book *Heart and Senses*. He had concluded, with a wealth of evidence, that all the senses of wonder and of beauty (and even of colour) are derived from the excitement of sexual attraction, and would be non-existent in a sexless species.

It was too late to bother with his toilet, which seemed less important in any case. He went back to his control chair. The *Nereid* was a fine little craft for the short distances. Stahlberg had two interests in her. One was speed. The other comfort, and suitability as a place to entertain women, as could be seen from a glance at the main cabin. With two tiny dressing and toilet cubicles (with showers) opening off it, it was a miracle of amenity in compression. Retractable into the wall were a broad bed, a bar, a galley, a fair-sized stereo-tank for all programmes. The floor was thickly carpeted in a cream Persian. It was a complete apartment, at the minimum cost of weight and bulk.

Only the two control chairs, in one of which Stahlberg was now seated, showed the speed interest. Set before the master instrument board, and the perfectly balanced controls, and under the ship's vision screen with its four alternative views forward, backward, and around the ship, the chairs were carefully designed gravity couches, with a system of sponge-plastic springs and hydromatic buffers able to provide the greatest possible comfort under the highest accelerations. Just the same a shot of the gravity-adaptation drug was advisable for the accelerations Stahlberg used.

He was able to combine these two interests over short distances (and the long ones bored him anyhow) because of a single principle. Once it became possible to carry enough fuel to keep the jets going all the time, the decisive factors are the maximum acceleration the pilot can stand, plus the

skill that enables him to risk a landing with as little adjustment and hesitation as possible.

The *Nereid* ran off a matter-converter field which was adjusted to turn a tough plastic, or nitrogen, into monatomic hydrogen — a simple enough substance which gives a jet more power than the clumsy atomic drives of the seventies and eighties: its powers had long been known — the difficulty was simply to produce it. Only the matter-converter fields, products of the science after atomics, had so far been able to do it.

Stahlberg had been second in the Continental Capitals Grand Prix, London to Accomac City in four stages, three years before. And though he did not race much now, he used the same bone-straining (in acceleration) and hair-raising (in landing) techniques.

All this, in what was just an extremely powerful and comfortable version of the ordinary man's runabout, was regarded by many friends as more of a clue to Stahlberg's nature than his multifarious writings. The significance of his attitude to women was more controversial among them, and they wished that the fuel problem had been more difficult or his favourite distance greater, so that they could have seen definitely if, and at what stage, Stahlberg would have sacrificed the ship's amenities as a girl-trap to its speed requirements.

He turned on the speaker. It was saying, ". . . our production is done in servomatic factories; war has ceased, except for the occasional raids from the Bases — so greatly played up by the Government for its own purposes. There is no poverty, no persecution. But what do all these avail if we lack a firm basis of freedom?"

The voice, dignified and firm, was recognizable as that of old Sevillano, the President of the Freedom and Vigilance League, commonly known as the Watchdogs. It was well known to Stahlberg, as to most other people on Earth, and there was a good deal in what it said that he agreed with. He, too, felt uneasy about it all, like many other people. But still, there was just that touch of idiocy in Sevillano's way of presenting his case.

The voice went on, ". . . an off-white Utopia! So long as the Government conducts secret research, so long as education is on lines that amount to psychological compulsion, so long as there remains a legal right to force psychological changes

even on the worst criminals, we can never be safe. It is not from the few and backward extremists of the Bases, whose attitude has anyhow probably been exaggerated by the Government, that we have anything to fear. It is in the outlook of the Government itself, which by failing to take these necessary steps, shows only too clearly the roots of an outlook terribly dangerous to us all. The thin edge of the wedge . . ."

The whole business of freedom and induced psychological compulsion was certainly enough to make anyone uneasy, and Stahlberg thought of it as little as possible (except for occasional forays forward in time in his quasi-historical writings), preferring to trust the Government. He certainly would not have trusted them if there had been the slightest serious cause for his uneasiness -but still he felt sometimes that it was the unsatisfactory position for a man who prided himself on the comprehensiveness of his interests. And the four-man veterans reunion of the old 175th Automatic Infantry had reminded him of the war, and the unpleasant results of mistakes in these matters. But this wasn't the time for thinking about it. He gave the dial an aimless spin which sent it off the station and down into the little used high modulation belt.

As it stopped he could hear, very far in the background, a quite different voice, tense and exultant, saying, ". . . liaison established. Large forces . . ." It was cut off by the characteristic splutter of a polar scrambler, showing Stahlberg that he must for a few seconds have been directly in the line of a tight and guarded radio beam. As this could only be one from a spacecraft above him locked to a ground station, it meant that the *Nereid* and the other ship must have maintained the same relative direction from the ground source for over a second, an astonishing coincidence in the first place, quite apart from his set having been on the same modulation band. What the somehow rather sinister message signified was another question. Nothing, probably: but in his present state of recovering from military reminiscences, it put him uncomfortably in mind of the war period.

He looked downward. A slow spin had again turned the port till it faced south-west, and its field of vision approached the sun. The great streamers of the corona flickered around its edge and then automatic filters cut out what would have

been a blinding glare. He sat back in a calmer mood and gazed at the polished curve of the ceiling.

After a while the altitude-radar's speaker said, in his own recorded voice, "Your height it three-ninety kilometres, buster." This had been fixed up for the irritation of Custis when he had borrowed the machine once, and was meant to imply that Stahlberg was too independent-minded to stand servility, even from machines. Still, this bluff familiarity did not suit his present mood Leaning forward he flicked its speaker out of circuit.

He could now see right over to the Caucasian shore already barely touched by the sun's rays; beyond them dusk had already fallen. He was late.

A faint susurrus from outside the ports indicated the first effects of the air. Looking out and to the east he saw the whole Black Sea. By some trick of the oblique sunlight it looked pale and golden, like a huge and very dry Martini—one rather late on in the party, moreover, judging by the great bites which had been taken out of the sides of the glass.

The strap that held him in the pilot's seat began to pull tighter, as the atmosphere took hold, slightly braking the small craft's uncontrolled dive, and already heating the forward edge of the fins into a visible cherry red It was a pity he was so late . . . but this was really just a formula of thought. Actually he was perfectly happy to have torn himself away so much behind schedule from the very delightful dinner, up in the space-station, with his three old friends. He enjoyed taking the *Nereid* in considerably faster than regulations allowed. And that Mireille would be very angry was an additional flame to that dangerous, attractive fire.

Stahlberg liked his life kept interesting.

He gave a short but violent burst on his jets, the 'g' effect of which pinned him flat in his harness, his cheeks pulled back along his teeth. The fact was that this sort of craft should not really have been taken out of the atmosphere at all, except in short hops like a flying fish's brief skim out of the sea He had used a booster to get up to the main space-station, but even so his fuel was only adequate to get him down again safely if he made up for it in several rather unorthodox ways using atmospheric braking till the fins heated to an almost critical degree, and giving himself nerve-racking

jolts of gravity at the last possible moment. In particular, it made necessary an accuracy difficult to attain except by automatic. And he could hardly use that, since it would have left him sunk in boredom, with nothing to do for minutes on end.

But this sort of thing happened so often that he wasn't even thinking about it. As the warm Earth and the night thickening over Sukhumi gradually reached up to receive him, so did the equally dark and warm girl they had ready for him. On second thoughts he'd better forget the portrait.

The speaker above the piloting screen coughed and said:

"Are you heading in for Batum? . . . Poti? . . . Sukhumi?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to come in on auto?"

"No."

"Your speed and altitude will be given you at ten-second intervals . . ."

On the video the half-dozen houses of Sukhumi began to show, still miles away to the east. Among those by the sea Stahlberg thought he could identify, second from the curve of the little harbour, the building he was heading for. A point of green light a mile or so inland indicated the official landing area for rockets.

The speaker said, "Your height is seven kilometres. Your speed is three kilometres a second." This was undoubtedly rather high. "Are you sure you do not want to use auto?" it concluded in what was almost a querulous tone, though Stahlberg knew that it must be recorded, since no human being was involved directly in the whole navigational and landing aids system.

He felt a bit tired. And was he slightly gay? Perhaps he should ask for a tape for the last thousand metres. But as he thought this he was already depressing the controls for the final braking of drop and forward speeds which would land him.

"Please do not land in the harbour. The field is at the green star. Please do not . . ." But, to another tough gravity pounding, Stahlberg was coming in to a cushioned landing on the dark water, snapping the guards round his hot jets as he touched in, as gently as the launching of some old-time ocean liner.

It was only a couple of hundred metres to the hotel, a considerable saving.

CHAPTER TWO

As Stahlberg went in, the auto-receptionist said, "Good evening, Sir!" How did it distinguish between a man and a woman? Was it by a scanner which gave it the shape, perhaps? He had been meaning for a long time to roll up a jacket, stuff it in front of his shirt, and come in with a gait altered—to the best of his belief—to counterfeit that of a female, in order to see whether it would then say 'Madame.' But it probably wasn't done by shape. Smell?

It was the sort of question that he never seemed to get settled. No doubt the machine itself could have given him the information, or connected him with an inquiry centre. But, feeling vaguely that that would be cheating, he compromised by asking in a high falsetto,

"Where is Miss Mireille?"

"In the front suite on the second floor, Sir. She is expecting you."

He walked in, slightly irritated. But as he got into the lift, he felt only the beginning of the tingle that ran up his back hairs and made his breathing seem to penetrate only a hand-breadth below his throat, however deep his effort.

Had he ever been around a girl like Mireille before?

Well, yes.

But . . .

But when he went in, Mireille was sitting quietly on a chair looking out seawards. The windows forming the whole front of the great room had been retracted. She faced directly over what was now the curved edge of a balcony, over the smooth glistening of the water. It was now that half-darkness

when, in these latitudes, a calm pause holds the sea clear and the air motionless, heavy and sweet. Silence, too, would have gone well with the scene, but someone—Sevillano still, in fact—was talking over the radio. Mireille turned slightly toward Stahlberg and he saw briefly those dark horn-gold eyes, the colour of Thracian honey, as she looked away again. The radio now seemed to be talking louder; perhaps she had turned it up.

"Hullo, darling. You don't want to listen to that."

"I don't want to listen to you either," said a voice like a high note on the cello—not as passionless however.

"Well, I hope you don't mind if I get a drink."

The radio continued. "A democracy? No, our present system can only be described as a psychocracy. Our children are brought up according to a plan laid down by the experts. The bad tensions are avoided, yes, but what else is lost? The scientists are not omniscient—you have heard me say that before. But now the new generation will all be from their chosen groove. No one is himself—he is the same self as all the others, an artificial self. The free play of uncontrolled forces was bad: but at least it ensured progress. The human race has avoided complete extermination by violence. It must not die of stagnation."

Martin reflected once more that, little though he wanted to hear all this, there was at least some sense in it, if not quite enough.

"You have just seen and heard Mr. Sevillano of the Freedom and Vigilance League, giving his views on the question of Freedom and Psychological Control."

Stahlberg, now having got his drink, seized the opportunity to lean over and switch off the machine, saying, "Not seen him, anyway, thank God. He isn't the best view in the world."

A well-planned pause to indicate the omission of the obvious compliment, then Mireille said coldly, "Do you know him?"

"Very slightly. He was John Custis' tutor." The back of her hair, cut in a sort of red black bell, really was entrancing. "I've just been with Custis and Henry Hayakawa and Vlakhov, as a matter of fact. I'm sorry I'm so late, dear, but I really couldn't avoid it. We dined on an anniversary of ours when we were together in the War—in this part of the world actually."

She swung round toward him, the mask of coldness breaking into tentative signs of admiration.

"Were you fighting over there in the Caucasus?"

That had been the only big disaster of the last campaign. His brother had been in the Tiflis 'dome.' In those days a defensive screen could be overcome by sheer power. The enemy had dropped enough fusion bombs on it, simultaneously, to overload its regenerators. The whole hemispherical screen, misty with ionization at the periphary, must have collapsed and let enough destructive energies into the interior to kill everyone.

"No, we were over in Turkestan, in the last big push up to Karaganda."

"What was it like?"

The interest in violence, the brilliant imbalance of her temperament, glittered in those eyes. He was over the first trouble now, anyhow, and went on. But there was really very little to tell; the campaign had been a victorious walkover as far as his front was concerned—very unlike the great struggles in the first phase of the war, before the fourteen-year truce.

". . . and then we found we'd been standing off a whole armoured division."

"Well, you have lived through something," she said, with that envy one occasionally met among people born with only a knowledge of peace. He angled the conversation back toward his alibi.

"The four of us were the whole battalion, under old Major Paton—he'd fought on the Moon earlier. None of us was over nineteen. We operated forty armoured vehicles between us. Custis was fair on the controls, but a bit slow at risks, and Vlakhov was sergeant and generally overseeing most of the time. But Hayakawa and I got pretty good at anything needing a sure touch."

"Except a woman's feelings."

"Now, darling. I'm very, very sorry . . . that cold look doesn't suit you Let me put that wrap round you. Have a drink?"

He didn't say anything further for a minute.

"Are you tired?" she asked.

"Not in the least."

"I haven't decided what to do. I don't know why I came down. I was just going to go back."

So more work remained to be done on her. His excitement, which seemed to be compounded of a selfless worship of physique, gesture and eyes, flagged temporarily, as often before on these occasions, at the silliness of the necessary manoeuvres. Still, she was quite capable of leaving even after all this trouble. He'd seen her first as a diseuse, over in Athens—one of the few surviving cities. Ten minutes of her on the stage and a short conversation afterward and he was hooked the True, the Good and the Beautiful had surfaced in yet another avatar—or perhaps only two of them.

"Let's have that drink." The suggestion, a friendly one, also represented his most immediate need

"All right. There's a couple of helmets plugged in to the dispenser: bring me one and you can use the other."

But this was a device which Stahlberg regarded with considerable contempt and apprehension. Based on the principle of the old electro encephalographs which charted the electric impulses of the brain back in the fifties, it was supposed to dispense the drink most suitable for toning up your mood You dialled the number of that one of the ten thousand odd arbitrary psychological types you most closely fitted, and then put the helmet on and let it take your brain rhythms. After a few seconds a concoction would be mixed from some central store in the hotel and channelled up in a glass

There were several objections, in Stahlberg's view. One was that anti-addictive, having made a lot of drugs as harmless and as socially acceptable as alcohol the dispenser tapes might feel that your mood required a shot of opium or hashish in your cocktail, but whoever programmed the machines had not yet devised any way of disguising the taste of these heavy alkaloid reeks A worse criticism was that, as he now pointed out.

"They never seem to make them strong enough. I'll fix my own."

"Do mine too, then."

"All right, I'll get a jug; and let's go down on the beach."

He went down the outside stairs, through the narrow palm-tree garden, lit only by the faintest phosphorescence In addition to the drinks he carried a self-inflating rug. She carried, he was sorry to see, the little receiver.

The night was moonless, the sand smooth and cool. The

sea lapped very lightly at the shore's edge, an inch of white clean foam. Almost cloudless, the sky held its full complement of stars.

He poured out drinks.

"I expect you've drunk quite enough already," she remarked, sipping her Bacardi with a sort of sleek intensity.

"Well, we had a certain amount with dinner. But someone must have put a soberer in the coffee. Perhaps they saw I was in a hurry and didn't want me to crash."

"I saw you come down on manual—I wouldn't have forgiven you if you hadn't—it was those subtle hands, I suppose."

"I'd far prefer to have them like this. . ."

That was better, though there was still a certain untamedness in the feel of the spirited creature.

"Most likely Vlakhov had it put in. He probably went straight back to work up in Aristillus."

"Oh, is your boozing pal *Lorimer* Vlakhov? Well, *he's* a person who does have some excitement." She turned and looked at him. He had clearly scored another point, and was glad that it was because of Vlakhov's exciting life and not his important position as Director of Projects—chief troubleshooter in the World Federation Government.

"I don't know that his life's all that thrilling. He certainly works a lot."

"Not like you."

"Oh, come now; I write a great deal of criticism and things. The *Lhasa Gazette* called my *Cultural Systems* book the clearest exposition . . ."

"Yes, yes, and you do a lot of jet-yachting and girl-chasing and all sorts of things. Anyhow, I don't care about work. I meant that Vlakhov has all this campaign against the Bases."

"Well, yes, though I don't think he gets much . . ."

"There was something about it on the air—some raider attacked Deimos, I think. . . I know it's fearfully secret, but did Vlakhov tell you anything interesting about it all?"

"Why, no. I don't know any more than you do." This was politeness. He went on, just the same. "They're the remnants of the old Soviet régime that managed to get away into space and build hide-outs and servomatic factories somewhere out in the asteroids. Under the Venus fog somewhere."

"Are they really Communist?"

"No, not noticeably. They just keep up the old phrases, apparently—but then their originators had already changed pretty considerably after all the coups and things of the fifties and sixties. I've been writing a series about the Soviet occupation of England from 1991 and . . ."

"I don't see why the Patrol doesn't find them." Like many lazy-minded people she had not bothered ever to visualize clearly the geometry of the Solar System.

"How many ships do you think the Patrol has?" he asked her with adequately concealed impatience. "Perhaps three hundred—possibly fewer. A lot of them are no use for long-range work, and they have to keep a lot on general interception and guard duties, and there's training too, servicing and overhauls. Suppose they spare even fifty for reconnaissance. How many million cubic kilometres does the Belt occupy? And how many rocks five-hundred metres long are there—scores of thousands at least, and even smaller ones could be used. The Patrol would find it hard enough to keep the orbits tabbed to make sure they weren't inspecting ones they'd seen already. The Bases could be camouflaged so that you'd need a landing party with penetradiation to find anything."

"Five hundred metres sounds small to live in," she put in, sticking doggedly to a subject which seemed to be slowing him down without making her friendlier in compensation.

"Just think of a hollowed out building that size," he answered. "The biggest skyscraper in the old days was the right height, and you'd have a lot more room crosswise—say the equivalent of eight or ten Whatever-it-was-Buildings. You'd have room to garage half a dozen ships and fill half the remaining space with factories and halls and hydroponic farms, and still have room to house five thousand families in comfort. I don't suppose they've got as many families in all the Bases put together, so that shows they aren't as cramped as all that. Not that they bother much about comfort, judging by the small hide-out the Patrol did find a few years ago—everybody in it gassed of course. Their fusion bomb failed to go off, but they take every precaution to avoid leaks."

He paused, thinking rapidly of how bitter life must be for the exiles, such a way out from the sun, deprived of all the pleasures of nature: a constant toil and struggle kept going only by hatred, ambition and dogma. The mechanisms of

psycho-compulsion had made it self-sustaining: perhaps they rendered it tolerable, or at least acceptable, to the poor victims. The soft charm of the view and the hard charm of the woman of fashion, appeared more desirable than ever. Not for the first time, he blessed his luck.

"Are they dangerous?" She leaned over him, her voice again like a breaking harpstring was it?

"No, of course not They can only have a few thousand people and a dozen or so craft. And their science and technology is always bound to be ten or twenty years behindhand. They can just raid and be a general nuisance. The only reason they survive at all is that they can keep their rank and file going with psycho-compulsion techniques. Of course they don't have any qualms or limitations on that sort of thing, while with us well you heard Sevillano's speech on the stereocast when I was coming in. That's one of Vlakhov's troubles too."

They looked out over the sea, both thinking of this. The most agitating and difficult question of modern life. The development of psycho-techniques capable of altering whole personalities had naturally led to the great debate on what freedom meant.

A man's mind is the fully determined result of fortuitous forces working on him from infancy. In what sense is he more free than if the impact of those forces were planned? We all recognize the need to cure, by any means, when the natural product is completely awry: why not go further and eliminate all troublesome twists? But if you do, where is your freedom? Such were the sort of questions which were bitterly debated throughout the Inner Planets.

Meanwhile no compulsion had been exerted on any scale, since the time, over twenty years ago, when several hundred thousand Yatsevites had been compulsorily psychoed, under martial law, at the end of the war. Still, the Government retained the right to operate in emergency cases, and a few dozen persistent rapers and murderers were rejigged every year.

The upbringing of children, too, was a difficult one. The best must be done for the new citizens. But critics alleged that the education-environment produced under psychological checks was a form of compulsion.

The organization whose President had been speaking on the

stereocast earlier in the evening were often referred to as the Watchdogs. They were deeply suspicious of the Government and conducted continuous agitation against it. In particular they demanded the end of secret research, claiming that it might produce more efficient compulsive methods and was anyhow wrong in principle. The Government, backed always by the electorate, replied that the most advanced research must be kept from the ears of the Bases.

Stahlberg's immediate feeling was that those who had been educated from birth under the new system lacked zing. He said:

"Well, I'm glad you had a few years of life before the new upbringing came in. There's a lot to be said these days for having been born early."

"Born early? How old do you think I am?" she asked, with a marked return of her old coldness.

Yes, it had been rather tactless. He remarked, "A man was saying on the stereo last week that the triumph of modern psychology is not the new microsurgery of the brain, nor the delicate rhythm-pattern imposition techniques, nor the highly specific drugs, but the new semantic training the realization that most troubles are due to misunderstanding and misbandling verbal symbols. Yet you, my dear, still misunderstand with all your might."

"Oh hell, another lecture." But her voice was friendly.

Encouraged, he went on, " . in particular (this man said) the relegation of the verbal but unreal distinction between 'mind' and 'body' to its limited sphere of usefulness Which seems odd: lovers have long known the silliness of the division."

Overhead, the quick star of one of the smaller artificial satellites swung brilliantly westward, to disappear instantaneously as it entered the Earth's shadow.

She drew herself more closely over to him. He would be able, he thought, to let silence take over in a few minutes

"What about the others?" She paused, and her voice was smooth and sleepy, more expressive of the beginnings of passion than of any desire to know, as she went on, "Tell me about Custis. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

"Tell you about Stahlberg?"

Above the heavy background rhythms of a Papuan nine-beat and the buzz of chatter from the thirty or forty other guests scattered about the high roof garden, Custis' voice rose rather tentatively, as if collecting itself for an important test. And indeed, the glitter of the smaller man's eyes was a trifle intimidating.

"Well," Custis finally surfaced with a description of sorts, "he's a believer in knowing something about everything he calls it being culturally integrated. As far as I can see, it means being a good, medium all-rounder instead of excellent at anything but you read his last book, of course?"

"Yes, I was just interested in his type of behaviour if you can mention it in front of Elvira" O'Hara turned to the girl, blonde, serious in fact, almost rating the unpleasant adjective 'intense'—who stood beside him with an untouched glass in her hand. Her yellow hair was smooth as though varnished; her dress black and shiny, taken up to her throat and very severe compared with the bare-breasted fashions worn by one or two of the other women. Even so she was smiling now, with a slight irony. O'Hara's curiously more-than-old-fashioned attitude about the shockability of women clearly weakened his obvious influence over her. It was doubtless part of the way of thinking which made him a permanent official of the Watchdogs.

It weakened his effect on Custis too, and the mild artist went

on almost curtly, "Martin Stahlberg—oh, he might be the basis of Nietzsche's remark about man's greatest desires being danger and play, so that he seeks woman as being the most dangerous plaything. That's not quite it though—he's a truth-seeker too, and behaves as if he thinks that girls have some sort of inherent wisdom, especially when reduced to mere intuitive femininity. You get some of that even in his book: but his behaviour does a lot more for the thesis!"

As always at these parties, one of the main entertainments was the clothes of the dressier characters of both sexes. For the first time since Renaissance Florence, fashion as such—the tendency for people to wear similar designs in dress—had disappeared.

Custis wore a one-day dark-greyish two-piece, with black lapels of just the same general shape as, though smarter than, what he wore in a jet-craft, where one can't have bits hanging about catching in things. His torange had extruded it that morning: indeed it was the only pattern it was adjusted to. Those who made a hobby of manipulating these machines could produce excellent and varied results, but Custis was frightened to change it now that it was satisfactory.

(The torange, which had long since solved everyone's clothes problem by weaving and tailoring direct from the liquid plastics, had been christened by its inventor, a keen limerick writer, who had long resented the notorious absence of rhymes in English for the words 'orange' and 'month.' His attempt to get 'panth' accepted as the term for the control device had been less successful, and it was now simply referred to as a 'programmer,' as on any other automated machine.)

Custis never went further than adjusting for lighter or heavier cloth. The shape of his clothes was particularly unsuitable for wearing medals, and he had attracted a good deal of friendly derision up in the space-station by (alone of the four men) turning up uncharacteristically wearing his full entitlement—a modest Free Britain Volunteer Cross, the Britain, Ceylon and Turkestan Stars, the Victory Medal, and the U.N. Star. He had taken them off before coming to the party, but had not had time to make a new suit, and the bulges where they had hung showed that he should have tried a

different material—or perhaps a different original fuel—in the torange.

Most of the other men, too, and some of the women, were in fairly simple all-purpose. And a majority of the women wore some variety of skirt. But apart from that resemblances were small. Even the men in all-purposes showed a varied collection of colours and combinations of colours, while the women ranged from shorts, shoes and earrings, through neck-to-ankle tights and classical chitons, right up to heavily decorative ensembles of metalfoil and broderie resembling the clothes of Indian temple dancers, Minoan girl bullfighters, or Versaillaises.

O'Hara turned away to talk to a chiton. Custis was silent, happy to be left with his neatly decorative companion

The conversation picked up around them, and they heard the usual chatter:

"And now my daughter's learning Hopi at school . . ."

"Got over from Lhasa in twenty minutes flat . . ."

"Surely you can get rid of him?"

" . . Mireille les Aigues. Her programme is the only really fresh one on the stereo these days . ."

"In my daughter's school they teach Samoan sexual techniques . . ."

"Let her suspect you're not her chattel . ."

"Of course Vlakhov wants power—no one would stick being an administrator without some power-hunger . . ."

The last light of a September dusk was fading from the calm English air, Custis had come in from the space-station much slower than Stahlberg, and had still reached the party in good time Like few of the population in these days of swift private air transport and scattered houses, he was the inhabitant of a city, and indeed of a flat.

The little town, called London for sentimental reasons, lay on the Thames by Hampton Court. The administrative centre of Western Europe, it had attracted, in addition to officials and scientists, a number of gregarious artists and others. And this crowed living, starting as a Bohemian eccentricity, was even beginning to become slightly fashionable. There were perhaps thirty thousand permanent inhabitants, making London the second town of the Solar System, after Luna City. The circumstances of the colonial settlements, on bodies with

inadequate atmospheres, made crowding inevitable. This was one of the things that rather discouraged people from taking jobs in the colonies. Atmosphere projects would alter that eventually, though probably not on the Moon

The reduction of the population had been fairly drastic. Many had died in the wars, and more in the general starvation in Europe and Asia under the occupation, quite apart from liquidations and mass deportations under appalling conditions.

The labour camp had proved a bigger killer than the hydrogen bomb For the victim had no threat of retaliation to make his oppressor hesitate.

After the first blast of bombs on Soviet and American strategic points during the land fighting, there had arisen the system of mutual ultimatum The cities had to be evacuated whenever the enemy threatened to blast them otherwise. So they had been knocked out just as effectively, but more humanely.

No doubt the bomb would have been used more wildly in the second, more deadly, phase. But by that time defensive science had caught up Research into the forces binding the nucleus had produced mesonics, with its field-effects, and the ability to create an almost impenetrable screen at will saved the free world.

From the summit of the slim building, as darkness settled, Custis and the blonde Elvira gazed eastwards out over the faint violet glow of radioactive 'Old London.' It had not been severely bombed in the wars but, as with so many other cities, its evacuation had been secured by threat of bombardment and it had then been sown with radioactive dust. Many of the other guests were looking out, silently, over the same prospect, a famous sunset scene.

To the left the Thames began its great swing northwards into the Diversion, built when it had been discovered that waters passing through the old city were poisoning the North Sea fish.

In a few decades it would be possible to reclaim the great city. But it was doubtful if anyone would want to live there again, even when the river was restored to the ancient bed, as Britons and Romans and all the others since had known it. For the days of the huge metropolises had past. Quite apart from the decrease in population, and everyone's ability to get

across half the world in an hour or so if necessary, there was no longer any reason for large concentrations of people: this applied not only to living, but even to work. As a result of techniques dating back to the fifties, almost all the work of administration, finance and communication was done electronically. And even more important, this was true of production too.

Underneath 'new' London, for miles in every direction, as in scattered areas throughout the world, there was a great city—one into which few men ever went. The underground city, originally a legacy of the war, had become a general amenity. In its giant concrete caves the processes of every conceivable sort of production, once programmed, were performed automatically.

'Automation', too, had started in the fifties, and the engineering advances of the eighties, in which America was largely equipped with underground servomatic factories to replace the ones destroyed or perforce abandoned in the early phase of the conflict, had won the war. Or rather had provided the material basis of victory—the victory itself had been obtained by scientific superiority in the nucleonic field, and by automatic regiments in which a few skilled men with cybernetic devices to control their armour and fire could outfight a thousand of the enemy.

Every year saw further obvious advances. For years now ships of raw material, itself automatically mined and loaded, had sailed to England without pilots, with servos set to compensate every vagary of weather and current. They discharged their loads into trucks in new port sites, whence it travelled underground, still automatically, to the five-hundred-feet-high, roaring, subterranean halls of the great factories. Rockets did the same with lighter materials. This was all merely the result of greater subtlety and complexity in control and repair systems, and represented no basic advance (though 'merely' in this context, covered the ingenuity and labour of two generations of engineers). But soon, it was hoped, matter conversion fields (like those in the rocket motors) would be able to produce any required material direct and save the trouble of transport. Later still the converters might be able to create the finished product direct. The era based on the work of the forties and fifties was nearly over.

Few of the guests looked as if they were the D Phil.'s (Engineering) who were about the only people trusted with jobs in factories. Their feelings were certainly less for the great works underground than for the nostalgias of history and landscape. Custis himself leant on the railing, his dark head hunched forward slightly in a typical posture. His lips were almost sulky and his grey-brown eyes held a melancholy look, set off by his remarkably undecorative clothes of the same colour.

The roof garden, used for parties of this sort, was a good fifty metres across, warm from hidden heaters in spite of being open to the air, and cleverly set out with yew hedges, bowers and goldfish ponds raised above the level of the stone floor. The more sociable guests formed a group in the open space in the middle with its small fountain, couches and bar. The others were on the periphery, in greater or less privacy. That of Custis and Elvira was very partial. Nor did he really wish it otherwise. For a moment they heard a solitary nightingale somewhere below them.

Then to the south a great stream of yellow fire came out of the sky, a falling torch, to sink to earth behind the low hills ten or fifteen miles away. It started the buzz of conversation again on the balcony.

"That'd be the *Third York* from Mars—it's the only ship due out of deep space today," said an enthusiastic rocket-watcher nearby.

"Mars is hardly deep space any more, with all the Outer Planet trips that are going on now. I hear they're starting a regular run to Callisto next year," another replied.

The first one answered, "When the photon drive gets going deep space won't mean in the solar system at all. . ." The two men turned away from the veranda and walked over to the bar, with the rest of the sentence. Elvira and Custis looked out again into the near-darkness.

But now distracting fluorescents came on the great spire in the foreground, the building which housed that most distinguished and exclusive of all bodies, the Interplanetary Society. Its ninety-odd-years-old Honorary President, the legendary 'Sir Arthur', was one of the guests, and his ripe, self-assured voice, was now audible behind them.

He was saying, "And I knew the Moon had really entered

public consciousness in the middle-sixties, when I heard a clerk in a pub reciting:

There was a young fellow of Tycho
Who was such a hell of a psycho-
path about sex
That he used to perplex . . ."

But now a new tune, solid and simple, all double-bass and flute, started on the recorders, and general conversation became even louder.

For something to say to Elvira, as tensely charming in speech as in silence, Custis remarked, "Don't go for a ride with Stahlberg in any sort of vehicle, especially a jet. It's bad enough ordinarily, and what it must be like for a girl, who would really get him cutting corners, I don't know.—Damned noisy things!" he added.

Custis' own method of travel, when he was not in a hurry, was by low-level skimmer, a slower and quieter way of getting about.

Fast jet takes you from place to place by hurling you out into the exosphere, and back to your destination on a fairly rigidly plotted curve A skimmer lets you go as low as you like, stopping where you like, and by whatever route you fancy. There was always a certain amount of ill-feeling between the two modes of progress—the Arcadian and the Utopian. But in practice most people used both, while prepared to argue warmly in favour of one to the exclusion of the other.

The epithet skimmer-fanciers most objected to in reference to their craft was 'foolproof', and they pointed to all sorts of expertise which could come in handy But it had to be conceded that they were pretty easy to run.

"I probably see more of the minor stir he (among others) sometimes causes than you do," Elvira said. "He writes at the level where pure reason and political polemic overlap. And that's where most of the propaganda battle is fought these days. Those articles have a big influence among the middle layer of thinking It's quite a problem, though his stuff isn't pro-Government except by implication, and not always then."

"I've got his last week's article here," Custis answered, pulling *Selene* out of his pocket and blinking. "It has a bit which I suppose is relevant to us nowadays. Mind you, he really does know about the fifties and sixties." He opened the little pocket magazine.

"I haven't seen it, though I know the series he's doing, of course," the girl remarked in an unencouraging tone.

So Custis, who had intended to read quite a bit of the article, simply said, "He attacks the idea, common at that time, that an enemy victory would at least have meant the avoidance of a nuclear war. He points out that, on form, the totalitarian world governments would have fought a series of schisms and revolts, which would have developed into full-blown fusion-bomb exchanges. There would have been an alternation of world tyranny and atom wars. He adds that the same would doubtless be the result if any government 'with the long-term fanaticism of general ideas and the associated hunger for power' took office here."

Elvira said thoughtfully, "Does he believe that?"

Custis put the magazine down on the edge of the pool and replied, "Oh, he believes it all right. But I'm sure he's almost equally critical of the present government, at least at heart he says it could develop into something bad on those lines in certain circumstances." He felt that the whole subject had become a trifle gloomy, as it was presumably bound to between two such serious people. So he said, "Look at the goldfish."

Products of the most highly developed biological techniques (in fact the pool was a sort of show place for the local breeders), they were, indeed, worth watching. Even the fantasy of earlier breeders had been exceeded, particularly in the colours. In the light of the special fluorescents under the water, fins like veils and plump or attenuated little bodies flickered and glowed silver, purple, scarlet, rose. But Elvira said:

"Surely the Bases don't fight each other, for instance."

Custis felt that if he had Stahlberg's techniques—and intentions—he could probably draw the conversation back to the fish by a well phrased comparison between the flickering asteroids in the black pool of space and these. . . . But he only

answered, "I believe there have been fights, haven't there? But they're in a rather special position anyhow."

"Well, perhaps." Elvira turned away from the pool and took another glass from the nearest dispenser. She said in a livelier voice, "Anyhow, you must introduce me to Stahlberg one day."

Sir Arthur's voice boomed behind them, "Talking about Martin Stahlberg?" They turned as he stood upright behind them, a triumph of geriatrics. With him was an almost equally distinguished figure, and one partly responsible for his fine condition: the broad, dark and aquiline Dr. Kizer, physician to so many of the famous—his face well known to Custis, as to all stereo-viewers, in connection with his treatment of the World President during his recent overstrain. He nodded and turned away, walking past O'Hara with another colder nod, in the direction of the bar.

Sir Arthur went on, "A brash young puppy, that Stahlberg, I thought. I caught him out the other day though." The old man laughed lengthily. "He was giving me his line about how culture is more integrated nowadays, and how in my time the literary men were morons about science and vice versa—unlike himself. So I gave him a very simple little problem in both. I quoted:

From morn
To noon he fell, from noon to dewy eve
A summer's day, and with the setting sun
Dropped from the zenith like a falling star
On Lemnos th' Aegean isle

and asked him (*a*) the source of the quotation and (*b*) the distance of fall, assuming it took place on Midsummer's Day and Lemnos is in latitude forty degrees north. And he got them both wrong!" The laugh boomed out once more, as he walked off to another group, turning to say over his shoulder, "That was a nice article of yours about Martian artefacts, Custis. Almost made me believe they were genuine!"

Custis told Elvira, "From him, that's high praise."

"I don't know anything about the Martian stuff." She looked at him intensely. A small tough-looking man with dark eyes had come up and was talking to O'Hara.

"Oh. Well, there's one in the corner." Custis pointed it out to her and they walked over. Mounted on a high pedestal was what appeared to be a group of spheres and ovoids fused together. They were green or black in colour, and some of them were covered with silver specks. An inscription at the base read: "Supposed Martian sculpture. Discovered A.D. 2002 near Lowell City, Sinus Sabaeus."

"Are they all like that?" Elvira asked.

"More or less the trouble is that they must be nearly a million years old, and there's no evidence that an intelligent species ever lived on Mars. In fact there are no known fossils which could even be remote connections or ancestors of an intelligent being." Custis, usually rather slow and shy, was beginning to get going, to the encouragement of the depth of her eyes. "So, many people think they are some sort of natural rock formations; but there are difficulties about that too. Now, I've felt for a long time – purely intuitively mind you – that they must be cut artificially. If you see a lot of them together you'll know what I mean. And recently I started applying some of the new logical matrix equations Dobro has developed for aesthetics . . ." Elvira started to sip at her drink.

A fair-sized group had now assembled round O'Hara and the tough looking character. As it grew bigger, O'Hara's tones became louder. Soon they were strong enough even to distract Custis from his own absorption.

CHAPTER FOUR

". . . psychopaths and criminals cured? Only by society itself committing the same offence. Two blacks don't make a white," O'Hara was saying, leaning forward polemically, his eyes thrust towards the dark man, who appeared quite unabashed.

"What's the argument?" Custis asked Elvira, rather ineptly, for it was plain enough that the usual question was being thrashed out.

"Oh, Ranchevski—that's the dark fellow—is one of that million (or whatever number it was) hostiles who were compulsorily psychoed at the end of the war. It *is* rather irritating when one of them starts to defend his compulsions. One can't help feeling that they ought to be on our side, as victims of the system." She frowned.

"Are you really a keen Watchdog?" Custis found it difficult to associate her with O'Hara, in spite of her previous remarks, but there *was* that dedicated look.

"Yes." She seemed surprised. "Didn't you know—I'm one of Richard O'Hara's assistants. That's *my* reason for living in London. What's yours?"

But Custis was interested in Ranchevski, never having met one of this category before. (Most of these Russians had drifted back to the little individual farms which, equipped with automatics and synthetics, had become the most productive areas in the world—rivalling even the great hydroponic farms.) He shook his head in a deprecating fashion and edged them both forward into O'Hara's group.

O'Hara had got on to another line of argument. "Moreover, it doesn't work. Take that boy who raped his grandmother in Santiago last week. He had certainly had an education under full psychological controls."

Ranchevski answered mildly, "Well, we can't control their whole environment, even as children. Who knows what went on, especially in the first few years of the system? Some children even now pick up a heavy insecurity before they are three, and it takes a colossal effort to bring it into a tolerable range. One can only limit aberration, not eliminate it."

"Yes, but you'd *want* to!" (O'Hara's anger was rather overdone for a friendly conversation.) "It's just the thin end of the wedge. Eternal vigilance is the price of . . ."

"Well, look," Ranchevski answered soothingly, "I don't actually disagree with you—I don't know enough about it." But O'Hara had broken off, on seeing someone on the other side of the terrace, and with a muttered apology, went over.

"I don't know why I angered him so," Ranchevski smiled at Elvira and Custis.

"Elvira was telling me that you people ought to be living symbols of psychological oppression, and it infuriates the Watchdogs when you aren't."

The other turned to Elvira with that humouring-a-pretty-girl look which, should, in theory, be so irritating to intense pretty girls. But he spoke, as before, sensibly enough. "I was brought up under different compulsions. The new lot I got at the end of the war had less anti-social results. I used to be one of the few real régime men—a police-soldier. I helped in the deportation of the Mongolians."

"Where were you captured?" Custis asked, vaguely expecting a war-time coincidence with his own campaigning.

But Ranchevski replied, "On the Moon. To operate further from base than stratofighter range, you had to have endless political clearance, and technical skills too. It was rather a rare combination. We never had more than a thousand or two men up in the Mare Serenitatis."

Someone had turned up the speaker, which was giving a fuller account of the Deimos raid.

Out there on the airless little satellite there had been hand-to-hand fighting between the technical staff and the raiders. Grappling awkwardly in the negligible gravity field, airpipes

had been slit and men stabbed in the broken corridors of the station.

The mystery was how the raiders had got in without giving the alarm. The announcer gave place to an official of the Patrol, who said that they had avoided the patrol ships, in itself an extraordinary feat, and had come in at very high speed during a switch-over to a new system of detectors which should have taken minutes, but for some reason—probably sabotage in view of the perfect timing of the attack—had left the station unprotected for over half an hour.

As the word sabotage was so calmly spoken, an audible sigh went round the listeners. It was the first time that it had definitely been said that the raiders had contacts with citizens.

"And now our reporter has just checked from Deimos and we can show you scenes from the satellite."

"Turn on the stereo," Ranchevski shouted.

Towards the centre of the roofgarden a cube of darkness came into being in the middle of the lights.

In it appeared a view of the cold and jagged rocks of Deimos, with Mars glowing red and green over the close horizon. The focus turned rapidly to the right, showing the wreckage of two of the three raiding crafts, fused to unrecognizable scrap. Beyond them lay the station, a grey dome secured to the rock. It now showed jagged holes at several points, and the pressure doors had been blown out.

Inside, the stereo showed astonishing devastation, not sparing viewers the sight of several corpses, dead of gunshot or suffocation, which still lay in the corridors. Rather more of them were citizens than in the highly chevroned uniform of the raiders.

As the scene faded, an angry murmur came from most of the groups in the garden.

Ranchevski remarked, "That's just what I was doing twenty years ago. . . . I can't understand why you Watchdogs make a row about Government secrecy precautions. Psycho-manipulation is one thing, but surely you don't want to strengthen those thugs." He gestured at the now-switched-off stereo.

Elvira snapped back, "The Government will turn us into thugs too, with its psychology and your friend Vlakhov's secret funds."

"Oh, come now, Elvira," Custis put in. "Surely, at least,

you'll admit we're better off than the raiders. They've got compulsive techniques too, and they use them to quite different ends."

"I don't see any substantial difference—but O'Hara is calling me." She went off, very straight-backed, with only the coldest of smiles for Custis. O'Hara, too, was in the middle of a heated group and himself looked fiercer than ever.

Custis gazed after her, rather taken aback. He looked round to the pool, to pick up his copy of *Selene*, but it had gone, he hoped Elvira had taken it to read. Ranchevski was smiling, and now said:

"Their arguments always sound all right till you reduce them to simple terms. In this case—'no bread is better than half a loaf.'"

But Custis felt compelled to defend Elvira. Like most people he agreed entirely neither with the Government nor the Watchdogs. But the effect of the recent scene on him was the reverse of what it had been on most of the guests. Knowing Vlakhov, he was sure that the whole thing, while quite genuine, had been angled to arouse popular indignation. And this, perhaps perversely, had the effect of irritating him against the Government. Moreover Elvira had been very persuasive, not in a propagandist way, but clearly and honestly.

He did not know quite how to put it without making a fool of himself. But before he could speak Ranchevski, who had been looking at him carefully, said, "Still, the Government's arguments have faults too. Sometimes I feel that the Watchdogs are partly right."

As Custis warmly agreed, another man, who had been sitting over by the pool looking vaguely at the goldfish in its illuminated depths, straightened up and said a trifle thickly, "But they all seem so unstable. Look at O'Hara. Why does he wear glasses? Practically no one does nowadays. He could perfectly well have one of the eye operations."

"One of his people told me that it's a rare affliction of some sort, that would need two or three operations a year to check, so that it isn't worth it," said Ranchevski.

"Well, I'm not an opthalmologist," the other, a red faced character—at least at the moment—answered. "But I don't believe it. They'd say that just to cover him. Their own psycho-

logists must realize it's a give-away. It would just indicate an unnecessary need to look different and make a show." The red-faced man looked severely at O'Hara's back, as it swayed to his conversational movements.

"Surely that isn't a very bad aberration?" Custis said.

"No, but he's supposed to be a leader of world opinion. And it isn't only that: you can see a certain imbalance in his general behaviour."

Another man, supporting himself on a dwarf apple tree on the other side of the goldfish pool, now shouted across:

"I heard what you said about O'Hara's eyes, Elliot, and I *am* a doctor. It's all . . . it's all nonsense." The self-identified doctor now walked around the pool to put his views from closer up. He went on more quietly:

"Of course O'Hara's eyes are bad. Elliott's just finding slanders against the Watchdogs, as usual."

Elliott did not appear put out, and merely said, "Perhaps you're right, Hamilton. It doesn't make any real difference though. O'Hara is as unbalanced as they come. All idealists are." He took out Custis' missing copy of *Selene*, which he had apparently got possession of while Custis was saying good-bye to Elvira, and said, "Now listen to this, by Stahlberg."

"Anyone who bothers about Stahlberg is just being fashionable," the doctor retorted. "All his stuff is just a half-baked version of what the wrong people have been saying for years." One of his shoes had half come off and his collar was torn, but at that he seemed as sober as Elliott, who had now lost the thread of the argument and retorted, "Well, as I was saying . . . what was I saying?", before he noticed the magazine, from which he then immediately began to read in a high gabbling voice.

"They had forgotten the two sayings, 'politics is the art of the possible' and 'le mieux est l'ennemi du bien'."

He paused, having evidently come to the end of a paragraph, but soon found the beginning of the next one and went on. "'But there was more to it than that. The writers in these periodicals had worked out a perfect formula of satisfying simultaneously -if we may use the psychological jargon of their own period- the contradictory demands of a touchily humane Superego and a sadistic Id. They were able to deplore

in extravagant language the minor inhumanities in their own parish, at the same time as they excused with relish the atrocities in the totalitarian lands, on the grounds that they were in the interests of progress, and hence, *really*, humane. Sadism is a usual affliction of idealists, then and now."

He looked up thoughtfully and repeated to the doctor, who was now snorting in an offended fashion, "Then and now."

The doctor retorted, "It's a lot of moonbull fancy using a word like parish bloody exhibitionist."

"I believe his article in today's number is better." Custis put in peaceably. "It's about Yaystevist political techniques in England, but it won't be on sale till the morning. That's really a more interesting subject, isn't it?"

Neither man paid the least attention.

Elliott said. "Here's another good bit,—where is it?—ah." And he continued, " 'The ability to evaluate situations properly is the key to human survival. To take an example of the sort of flexibility one would like to see if, after twenty generations of absolute peace and co-operation, there was a sudden invasion by a species from another stellar system, every individual should be able to size up the situation at once, and the most stringent and self-sacrificing military measures come into effect without delay.' "

The doctor, breathing as heavily as ever, retorted, "Just like you, taking it for granted that an alien species would be hostile!"

"I'm not taking it for granted at all, my good Dr. Hamilton," Elliott said warmly, almost rising from his stone perch.

Custis, who had read the article twice already, was following the conversation with less and less interest.

This epithet 'doctor', almost the only point on which the two men agreed, struck Custis as the most doubtful assumption of the lot. What on earth could this dull and clumsy oaf be a doctor of? Could he really be a medical man? But that was more likely than a D Phil. (Engineering) or D Sc. (Mesonics) or any of the other key men of the moment. Custis had long since noticed that doctors (like schoolteachers) are inclined to be a bit naive in their views the result of going on being students when most people have entered adult life. But if Elliott was having the advantage of the argument it was simply because he relied on someone else's written word while

the other sot had to fall back on his own fuddled intelligence. On the other hand Elliott talked more and thus had more chance to sound silly.

"Doctor," Custis muttered sceptically, turning away.

"Not all doctors are like that."

He looked up It was Dr. Kizer standing under a baobab. He must have just come up He was looking at the two arguers with an expression of anger and disapproval which seemed disproportionate, even for one whose corporate pride was thus involved.

Elliott went on, half out of the stone seat around the edge of the pool, "You just assume they'd be all right. I don't assume anything. Your assumption is just concealed sadism against your own kind! Sadists -idealists, then and now. And as for O'Hara he's just a bloody morpion!"

With a cry of rage Hamilton lurched forward and fell on his face in the goldfish pool. Elliott got to his feet to help him out. They moved over toward the bar dripping water and still arguing. Dr. Kizer strode forward, pushing past Elliott. He seized his soaking colleague by the shoulder, took a tablet from his own pocket and thrust it between the other's lips.

"Swallow that at once!"

It must have been a soberer, and a remarkably quick and powerful one. In a moment, the expression on Hamilton's face changed completely, and he straightened up. The two doctors marched off together, Kizer's hand still gripping the other's shoulder.

Elliott turned for a moment and called to Custis, "To think that it started in a discussion about O'Hara's rare physical affliction!"

"Conversation about rare diseases?" Sir Arthur was rounding the pool to rejoin them. "If you knew how banal it sounds to an old man. In my day only old women talked like that. But now it's almost respectable."

He sat down on the pillowed stone at the water's edge and looked up.

"However," he continued, "if you want to know the greatest difference between the days of my youth and the present—or perhaps I should say what would be most surprising to a man from the mid-century—it isn't your conversation, or your psychological machines, or interplanetary settlement, or

anything of that sort." He turned and pointed to a group by the wall to the left of them. "It's that sort of thing."

There was nothing particularly striking about the group, at present laughing in friendly and intimate fashion. It consisted of the psychologist Yana Flinders and her three lovers. She was certainly dressed in a way which looked extremely chic. Golden cords from the waist crossed under her arms and behind her neck, leaving both breasts bare. One was powdered or painted the colour of her skirt, while the other was left natural, except that it was tipped with a brilliant scarlet.

Very pretty, too. In fact Castis had met her through that connoisseur Stahlberg, when the latter was giving her up owing to his intolerant possessiveness. But not as striking, one would have thought, as, let us say, the photon drive.

CHAPTER FIVE

Henry Hayakawa had taken longer to get from the space-station dinner to his destination than either Stahlberg or Custis. The Photon-Drive Experimental Project was in orbit, at the Trojan point sixty degrees ahead of the Moon. Here the enormous energies involved would harm no one but those actually engaged on the project, even if they got completely out of hand. And strong security precautions could be taken. Raiders could, with luck and sabotage, just contrive an attack on the fairly unimportant post on Deimos. The entire estimated resources of the Bases would have difficulty in getting through the defences of the Project.

Hayakawa, having identified himself at various detector distances, drifted slowly in towards the Project. As he approached, the great conglomeration of girders, spherical chambers and tubular corridors showed its detail—as muddled and unattractive-looking a shambles as the main space-station from which he had come, and, though nothing like as large, still nearly four hundred metres long. It was hardly possible to keep the space-station tidy, with its new sections proliferating out in all directions to meet a continual and various demand; but the apparent untidiness of the Project was something different. It was only superficial and due to failure to smooth over the loose ends of a temporary affair. The layout was substantially well-planned, a great laboratory.

As he came in to the black bulk magnetic grapples took the ship, absorbed the remnants of its inertia, and pulled it slowly

against the main airlock. A dozen other small crafts were tied up around. A larger ship hung, slowly rotating, about fifty yards off.

Beyond was a splendid view. The double planet Earth-Moon was visible at its best. The Project was equidistant from the two bodies, and they now shone clearly, both two-thirds full. It was a strange contrast. On one side the earth, twelve times as large and eighty times as bright, presented a globe of variety, of white, green, yellow and blue, with its edges blurred by the softness of atmosphere. On the other, cold and shrunken, with a contrast only of darkness and lightness of tone, its smaller companion seemed almost ashy, not silver but pewter, by comparison. Yet, in a curious way, although the earth represented home, the human race, history and so on, taken purely as a view the moon was more traditional and had deeper roots in the visual imagination of mankind. The moon goddess that Havakawa's ancestors had worshipped was the shining disc in the sky, the earth goddess had never been anything of the kind.

The little bearded scientist went through the lock. In the reception chamber two of his assistants, a tall man and a small girl, were waiting for him, floating a few feet off the floor, but within reach of the handrail cables.

"Hullo, Chief"; their voices, baritone and contralto, contrasted less than their appearances.

"Hullo, Van. Hullo, Ayesha. Everything all right?"

"Yes." The thin, rather dour Van Vlissingen answered. "Everything's ready for the first test. The journalists have come, so I guess you'd better order it as soon as you think."

"Will an hour's notice be enough?"

"Yes."

"Go ahead and give it then."

Van Vlissingen pulled himself to the wall and took up a speaker. "Central . . ."

"Oh, H-H," Ayesha said, as the other gave the orders, "you look exhausted. Come to the top mess and have some coffee. There's no one there."

They launched themselves towards a hole in the ceiling, the entrance of the tube leading to the mess. Like a lot of other people these days, they had spent so much time in free fall that such movements were almost second nature. Even so, as

they strapped themselves into their chairs and started sucking the coffee out of flexibulb, Hayakawa complained of the disadvantages,

"You'd think it would have been possible to give the Project some spin—it's strong enough to take the P-drive thrust, after all."

"Yes"—the Arabian girl parked her empty bulb an inch or two in the air above her knees—"but we are supposed to be able to live and eat in the liner. It didn't occur to them how impossibly inconvenient that would be. Even so, I go over there occasionally for a game of squash."

"It's like everything here," Van Vlissingen put in from the door, looking round the bare and coldly-painted room they had improvised into what amounted to a rather inadequate coffee and sandwich bar, "but it will soon be over now."

The little physicist remarked, "They gave us everything we need in appropriations for the star-ride. I was talking to Vlakhov about it. In fact we could have had what we wanted for this too, but they didn't realize until too late that one wants to eat near the job. We're lucky even to get that central corridor and hall rotating."

"In fifty years we'll have anti-gravity, and gravity control with it," Ayesha remarked. "Then no one will have to bother about this sort of thing."

Van Vlissingen looked at her curiously and asked, "What do you think about that, H-H?"

Hayakawa replied, "There's no real basis for anti-grav."

"Except intelligent anticipation," Ayesha said with a smile.

But the little professor, pausing between sucks at his second bulb, answered more seriously. "My dear, I don't deny that extraordinary developments may take place. But our job is to do what can be done now, in the classical fields."

"Oh, you've been a mesonics man all your life and you're like an old hen about it," she retorted, pushing down her legs, which had floated off the floor through too much attention to the discussion.

Hayakawa leant back royally and replied, "It's easy to indulge one's undisciplined fancy. To see and work out the full possibilities of a real science—and mesonics will be able to do pretty well anything in the end—takes a genius," he concluded rather smugly, "A *brave* genius, I mean. And speaking of

bravery, remind me to tell you all about the old battalion's, with Vlakhov and Custis and Stahlberg and me—its famous action before Kashgar for instance."

Ayesha said with wide-open eyes and an obviously artificial air of naive admiration, "Oh yes, do tell us again all about the time you put hulls on your vehicles and fought a naval battle in the Aral Sea!"

"Why, you horrible girl! But I suppose that'll have to be later." Hayakawa rapped out. "Have you got the journalists assembled, Van?"

"They ought to be in the rotating hall in three minutes, H-H. And, by the way, I should warn you. There is a reporter from the Watchdogs there. Aristillus told us they tried to keep her out by various tricks, but they couldn't very well order her off when the *Argus* was invited."

"Her?"

"Yes, it's Cecily Askerton. A tough egg."

"Pretty?"

"Not my type," the Dutchman answered in a dubious tone.

"I know what you mean—a blonde. I rather like tough blondes," Hayakawa said meditatively, rocking his small body backwards in the straps of his chair. "Even so, I must say I catch myself envying Martin Stahlberg his assignment. All he said when asked about his movements after our dinner was 'Yum-Yum'."

A horrible sucking noise, the unavoidable accompaniment of finishing a drink from a flexibulb too quickly, filled the room. Then Hayakawa threw the bulb over to the wall and Ayesha was able to say, "How did you enjoy your booze-up?"

"Fine, thanks," Hayakawa smiled. "Stahlberg was in great form. In the early stages he showed me an article he'd written, incidentally, which had several arguments which might come in useful with this blonde picador. There was one which would appeal to you—about the human race being flexible-minded enough to cope with interstellar invaders even after generations of peace—strictly science fiction."

"Yes, I read it." The girl had curled up in her chair, a plump dove.

"Well, really, everyone seems to read Stahlberg these days—he's more famous than any of us."

"Oh, no, just that particular bit of Stahlberg's article caught

my eye. I really take *Selene* for its science-fiction story they had one by old Willis this week. All about a really educated fellow knowing all about science, and open-minded too, going ahead to the year 2500 and not understanding anything at all about the techniques, or even about society."

Hayakawa released his straps and lay back in the air, in that perfect relaxation possible only in free fall. He observed drowsily, "Well, I don't suppose someone from the Hundred Years War would make head or tail of our own time—but why you call that science-fiction I don't know. It's admission-of-ignorance fiction."

Van Vlissingen kicked himself over to the door, saying as he rose through the air, "Well, I've heard all this before, and I'd better be getting along anyhow. The logistics of a place like this make one tear one's hair, I bet Shaw hasn't got his compensator crew on the job in time," and he sailed out of sight.

Hayakawa touched his toes a couple of times with the air of a man who is limbering up for a physical ordeal, and remarked, "As for monsters from interstellar space, that's what we'll be if the drive works properly. Incidentally your fantasy-filled mind will be delighted to hear that Curtis thinks someone from another stellar system was lurking about on Mars a million or so years ago."

"Really? Now that *is* fascinating." Ayesha's big houri-eyes seemed even bigger.

But Hayakawa went on, obviously bored by the subject, "Van's a dull dog, isn't he?"

The girl shrugged and said, "He could do his job a lot better if you'd let him see all the secret stuff."

"Oh," Hayakawa answered in an easy tone "I know he's always trying to get more educated. But there isn't time for that and the job too And he doesn't need to know everything for his general engineering and organizing work He's a good organizer, I must say, that's because he worries so "

"You worry, yourself," she retorted, buttoning up her sleeves and looking at her watch in a marked manner.

"No, I only worry *after* things have gone wrong," he replied.

A mutter from the compensator rockets showed that the station had drifted slightly off position. The slight impulse

brought the floor up to Hayakawa and he pulled himself to the chair, adding, "Do I look all right?"

"Just comb your hair," Ayesha replied after a critical appraisal.

As he followed her advice he went on, "Don't try to get any more people cleared for the secret stuff; Aristillus doesn't like it. Well, let's be off."

His progress to the meeting had something of the panache of that of a top surgeon towards an operating theatre. Even in the free-fall sections an air of bustling importance attended his passage, as various scientists and technicians looked out from their operation sections.

"Hullo, Chief."

"Hullo, Ellen. Got that field focus right?"

"As long as you press the right switch," she called after him, along the tube.

"Hullo, Dan."

"Hi, H-H."

As they approached the entrance of the rotating corridor, Van Vlissingen joined them, saying, "I still don't think they'll get anti-gravity. It's meaningless in principle."

Hayakawa said from in front, "They've got it already—don't you read science fiction?"

But Ayesha retorted calmly, "In 1970 hyperon-resonance would have been practically meaningless. Science can only see about thirty years ahead, even vaguely. In 2300 they'll have things we can't even conceive properly."

"Anti-grav will probably have been discarded as old-fashioned," added Hayakawa indulgently: this was an old quarrel of theirs.

Transfer from the stationary corridor to the one rotating on bearings in front of them is the sort of move that is always good for a fall with the inexperienced. The best way is to launch oneself into the air in the centre of the join and come down to the floor inside. The speed of spin was only enough to give moon-surface gravity, and did no more than make them stagger.

They entered the longer room with dignity, going up to seats on a little platform. In front of them were thirty or forty reporters; in the rear a dozen of them had set up recorders and stereo-links. They might have been in a rather improvised

conference room on a planet, except that the gravity was only directed straight downward in the middle of the room and the nearer one got to the walls the more the pull shifted to the side, so that people standing at the edge of the room were leaning noticeably away from the centre.

Hayakawa noted that the organizers had not managed to keep the only blonde out of a front seat. He caught himself looking admiringly into what became a remarkably cold stare, and shook his eyes loose.

Ayesha was on her feet. "Ladies and gentlemen, Professor Hayakawa, O.W., the Director of the Project, will give you a short general account of it. Copies are not now available, as he will be speaking impromptu, but if any agency, paper or station is not recording for itself we can give them a copy of our recording afterwards. When the Professor has finished you may want to ask him some questions." She waved toward Hayakawa, and sat down.

The Director got up and spoke:

"You've all been around the station and seen something of the set-up, and I hope all the arrangements have been satisfactory. If not, tell me afterwards. Meanwhile, forgive me if I'm being too simple. I propose to give you briefly the background to the Project.

"During the truce, in the late eighties, advances in the understanding and control of intra-nuclear forces led to the discovery of mesonics and hyperon-resonance technique. From this were developed a series of field effects. The first of these, the 'absorption-field,' absorbed radiation and projectiles to the limits of its own power input, and converted them into harmless neutrinos. Other fields were developed, one of which, the 'freezer field,' inhibits all chemical action. A recent development, incidentally, is the ability to focus this field to a very small point, so that it can, for example, block the activity of a single nerve or synapse. This is used in modern psychological manipulation. The latest development is the full-blown 'conversion field,' of which the others are particular variants. A conversion field can in theory be set up which will convert any form of matter or energy into any other form. Refined work in creating material elements is still only in the laboratory stage, but it is now possible to convert matter into raw radiant energy, running the field itself on a small part of the

enormous power obtained from such conversion. It has long been known that light had mass, and that if enough radiant energy could be generated it would drive a spaceship. And if its energy derived from the conversion of matter it would overcome the fuel problem, even as regards interstellar journeys. The difficulty has been that if even a minute proportion of the energy leaked back into the rocket it would vaporize it instantly. It has now proved possible to focus a conversion within an absorption field, tuned so that matter for fuel can be put through into the conversion field, but that radiation can't get back. We have now built a full scale engine on these principles, and it is this that is going to be tested today."

There was a bustle at the back of the room and a young man interrupted with:

"Excuse me, Professor, I wonder if you could stop for a few seconds I've got a broken tape—and you're going so quick that I haven't time to change it and get your talk."

Hayakawa had indeed been speaking in a rather fast and aggressive manner. He felt slightly put out by the hostile presence in the front row. He now said, "We'll let you have a tape of anything you've lost," and went on at once:

"The main application of this is obvious. It will make interstellar flight just possible. The astronomers now inform us that several of the nearer stars have, or probably have, planets —Tau Ceti, Procyon, Sirius, and so on. The photon drive will get us to the one the astronomers finally advise, in a period which will be something in the nature of twenty years. This is still a long time, certainly, but speeds will be reached even at the end of the first year's acceleration which are high enough, relative to that of light, to produce a considerable time-contraction so that the period *for the crew* will be considerably less Moreover it will be possible to power a vessel large enough to make life tolerable for the crew I think you will be interested to learn that work on the hull is about to start Thank you. I expect you have some questions."

A lanky young man at the back of the room got up, indentifying himself, "Maxwell; *Mirror*. What about the crew, Professor Hayakawa, numbers, sex and so on? And how will you keep them happy?"

"There'll be about twelve of us. Both sexes—we may be

stuck at the other end by some accident. We'll keep happy the usual ways the psychologists are helping of course."

"We? You're going yourself, Professor?"

With a broad and optimistic grin which should go down well on stereo, Hayakawa answered, "Try to keep me off it!"

A studious-looking young man in the front row, but at one end of it, away from Cecily Askerton, said in a serious tone:

"Professor, what do you see as the later results of mesonic field research?"

Hayakawa leant forward, his fingers spread out to support himself on the desk and answered, without a trace of his earlier gruff manner, in a voice that with someone else might almost have been called religious:

"Soon such fields will be adjustable and controllable to such a degree that they will be able to do everything production, transport every conceivable technical task. And we will have them small enough for anything: they will replace every present form of machinery. Moving parts will no longer be needed, everything will be on the molar level, or lower, every manipulation of matter and space will be possible without gross movements."

Young Maxwell rose again and said, "Well now, Professor Hayakawa, that sounds as though you didn't see anything beyond refinements of present-day technique. What about the photon drive itself, for instance? A lot of people say that Manchip's warp equations may give us a much easier way to get to the stars, eventually."

Ayesha grinned approvingly, but Hayakawa's face turned stubborn and there was no other word for it possessive. All he finally said, however, was "Manchip's equations are at present very controversial and only give hints of a vague possibility of timeless matter or signal-transfer through space, and that in theory only, there's nothing a technician could lay his hands on."

There was a pause in which Ayesha pushed over to him a piece of paper on which she had written, "Wasn't that true of mesonics once and of atomics before that? You practical scientists are just unimaginative, short sighted, parochial old goats but I'll nag it out of you on the trip!"

As he finished reading it, another questioner brought the discussion back to the test itself, with a query about the

amount of power to be used. Hayakawa, his good humour entirely restored by Ayesha's straightforward methods, answered satisfactorily.

As the questions, mostly friendly to the point of enthusiasm, proceeded, he noticed that Cecily Askerton remained seated, her hands folded in her lap, perfectly motionless, upright yet relaxed in her neat blue business suit, with a calm cold look on her face. He was pleased to note that at least it was the small sort of blonde face, not the long serenity he had expected. But the question was not her looks but her possible action. She looked quite capable of causing a very unpleasant break in the present mutual-admiration bean-feast. And sure enough, as the questions died down, she rose from her chair and addressed him in a calm judicious voice. "I'm Cecily Askerton, scientific correspondent of the *World Argus*. You said at the beginning of your talk that we would be allowed to comment on what we had already seen. My comment is this: we have seen nothing significant. Are the absurd security regulations that have surrounded this whole research to be maintained, or is the world public to be allowed to know *how* the drive works?"

"The details are still to remain secret," Hayakawa answered —this was what he had been expecting, yet he felt an unexpected surge of anger.

"I hope you aren't going to tell us that you fear the effect if it fell into the hands of the Bases—a few pirates outnumbered twenty thousand to one, ten years behind us in technique, and having to devote most of their energies to mere survival."

"I certainly am going to tell you that," the Professor said hotly. "If they got hold of up-to-date technique they would be a real menace. They're a big enough nuisance as it is - almost as much nuisance as . . ." A smart kick on the angle from Ayesha stopped him in time, technically speaking, though it was plain that everyone knew how he was going to finish the sentence. A moment of awkward silence was broken by Ayesha rising and saying:

"The test will take place as soon as you are in your positions. As you have been told, Dr. Van Vlissingen will accompany you to the observation room of our dormitory liner, and it will be piloted to a distance of about a hundred kilo-

metres. If anything really bad happened you would not be safe even there, of course, but this will be safeguarding you in the event of minor mishaps, while you will be able to observe reasonably clearly." A young technician approached her from the room's communicator and murmured something. She went on, "I have just been told that there will be a postponement for twenty minutes. Our apologies. If you care to remain here, a drink will be available in a few minutes."

"What's the matter, Dan?" Hayakawa asked, rather anxiously. "I know these short technical hold-ups: may last for hours!"

"It's nothing on the main drive, H-H," the boy answered, "only the compensating rockets – some slight hitch on the fuel pumps."

"Well, if they aren't ready within an hour, tell them to have the test anyhow."

It was intended to hold the station in position by having the thrust of the photon drive automatically compensated by ordinary rocket blasts. The ship would then remain motionless, and deviations could be checked against buoys already put out.

"In case we have to test without compensation," the Director continued, "tell Ellen Manders to get ready to jettison markers at thirty-second intervals, as soon as we're blown out of sight of the buoys."

"Right—but I don't suppose it'll be necessary," the boy said, turning back to the communicator.

Hayakawa returned to the group of journalists, all drinking. "Everything all right, Professor?" one asked.

"Yes, hardly even a technical hitch," he answered abstractedly. He felt he ought to apologize to the Askerton woman, if, indeed, she would now speak to him at all.

As he looked round for her, she spoke quietly from behind him, "Professor Hayakawa, perhaps you think I am annoyed with you?"

He turned, blushing slightly. "Er, yes, I thought . . ."

"No. I could see that your intemperate language was only a sort of honesty." Her precise diction seemed a trifle less cold.

She went on, "Usually argument with . . ."—she paused for a moment before using what she seemed to find an unpalatable phrase—"with . . . Watchdogs is not only heated,

but becomes emotional rather than rational. I feel that perhaps you, as a scientist, could make me feel a little more what Government supporters really think—apart from all the ordinary thoughtless conversation, and mercenary vagueness." A smile, friendly and intelligent, not warm but welcoming, surfaced on her hitherto frozen mouth.

Hayakawa found himself unable to launch into the angry oratory he had felt rise up at her original question. In a way very unlike his usual approach he now said, looking firmly into her not-very-dark-blue eyes:

"I feel that we are in a world which is in some sense truly free. To put it crudely: its general principles are not simply those of traditional liberalism, but rather deduced rigorously from the simple principle that whatever tends, in society or in the mind of the individual, to prevent people developing the characteristic which distinguishes the human being from the animal, is bad. That characteristic is the fact that a human being is, in principle, capable of indefinitely extending the flexibility and aptness of his responses to any situation. The animal, and the malfunctioning human, work to virtually automatic, unconditional stimuli. The aim of psychology and semantic training is to remove whatever hinders the attainment of complete inflexibility of appreciation and recognition, or cuts the ability to learn." He paused for breath, then continued more slowly. "The principle of the organization of society is that nothing hampering these freedoms is permitted. The intention is that in the long run a community of human beings collaborating freely in the ways best suited to ensure human survival—a simple objective concept—shall arise, in which flexibility of mind will be as complete as possible."

"That sounds excellent. But what do you mean by flexibility?" She spoke interestedly, almost friendlily.

"Well, to take an example: the human race should, even after twenty generations of absolute peace and co-operation, immediately size up the situation and take the most stringent and self-sacrificing military measures if faced with a sudden invasion from another stellar system." He hoped she had not read *Selene*.

But she answered with a slight smile which, though not unfriendly, made him wriggle with embarrassment, "That

exposition of Stahlberg's is clear and honest and I like it better than most I have heard But it seems to be based on what may be a fallacy the criterion of survival Is that automatically the only highest aim? I think you pragmatic scientists are on too low a level. But your man is telling us to go."

Hayakawa looked up. He had not noticed the call from the platform, and barely had the initiative to bow and say "Goodbye" as the journalists were all ushered out towards the waiting ferry Cecily smiled politely as she left.

"O K , H-H, they've all gone We've got a control room rigged up for you behind the stage I thought you'd like it better than in no g," Ayesha said briskly from the corner of the room.

"Where did the Askerton woman get that extraordinarily precise way of talking?" the Professor asked in an objective sort of voice.

"Oh, she was a professor, too," answered Ayesha innocently.

"Oh." Hayakawa went up to the control seat, linked to all operators by intercom He felt inclined to reconsider his views in the light of Cecily's remarks about survival—the first even remotely convincing critique he had heard of his own positivism. But as he looked over his copy of the test programme his doubts faded away Ayesha sat in the seat beside him, and gradually Cecily's features faded from his mind, in favour of the dials before him, and the accustomed presence beside him. He relaxed and lay back in the chair

After a while Ayesha reported, "They're all in position. The liner is out at planned distance Everything ready."

"I must have been asleep."

"Yes, I didn't wake you But you can start things now "

"All right." He switched on all the communications and said, "Stations report."

"Absorption field ready."

"Conversion field ready."

"Focusing ready."

"Communicators ready."

"Compensating rockets ready at last."

"All right " He wiped his forehead, his voice tightened to his usual grip and authority "Absorption, warm up."

"Warm."
"Focus."
"On."
"Conversion."
"On, and control transferred to your panel."

Before him the instrument showed all well. Conversion had started, set at minimum. He half-turned to Ayesha and a cheerful smile passed quickly between them.

He turned up conversion to a higher power. The ship trembled slightly as the thrust took hold and the compensators automatically blasted in the other direction.

"Lorimer Vlakhov will be pleased with this," he said to Ayesha in his usual brisk voice, turning the control slightly higher, to five per cent output.

As he spoke the roar of the explosion twisted the steel walls about them and slammed their bodies hard at the ceiling. A blinding flame brought total darkness.

CHAPTER SIX

Vlakhov had taken nearly three hours to get to his office on the Moon. During this period he had had his sleep for the day, lying pressed into the couch by more than two gravities of acceleration.

In his office in the crater Aristillus, the morning of an administrator awaited him.

He pushed through the swing doors of his anteroom, with their sign, 'Government of the World Federation: Office of the Director of Projects,' and said "Good morning, Peggy. Anything special?"

"Good morning, Lorimer." The redhead looked up with a smile at the heavily built Director. "It's all on your desk. You've got a delegation to see you at 05 and you'll want to look at the photon-drive test. I'll tell you when they report ready. It's scheduled for 04."

A lanky mulatto, Chief Assistant Macandrew, sat sprawled in one of the guest chairs. He got up as Vlakhov entered with a "Good morning, Lorimer."

"Hullo, Caleb." Vlakhov sat down at his desk. He looked a trifle wearily from under his heavy eyebrows at the apparatus of efficiency all round him. The speakers and the stereos, the great safe with its coded tapes, the neatly ticketed papers in his tray. Finally he said, "I ought to get around more."

Macandrew said shrewdly, "From that, I guess your dinner gave you a feeling for non-official opinion you can't get second-hand from my operatives."

"You're quite right." Vlakhov paused "I dined with Hayakawa the photon chap, and Custis, who is an artist, and Stahlberg, who's a sort of general amateur. They're none of them fools. H-H, of course, is a very positive type, as you know, and has no doubts about anything But I was struck by the views of the other two. Martin Stahlberg takes things pretty lightly, and Custis is rather a solemn sort of bird. But they're both noticeably unconvinced about Government psychological policy."

"Affected by Watchdog propaganda?" Macandrew inquired.

"Indirectly, no doubt. But they're capable of forming their own conclusions."

Vlakhov got up and strolled over to the window. It was late afternoon, of the Moon's fortnight-long day. High in the southern sky an enormous crescent Earth, a slice of Atlantic and America, white and green, hung above the jagged, barren lunar peaks. These lowered, clear and implacable, over the barren dust of the crater's floor. For outside on the surrounding landscape there was no changeable, symbolic weather, to match a man's mood But Vlakhov hardly noticed all this as he looked over the window-box, where a cluster of vacu-lichens spread their grey-green convolutions a rather trite reminder of the tenacity and adaptability of life.

"No," he continued, "the uneasy feeling must be very widespread among sound men How far can someone brought up, and in a sense manipulated as to his original tendencies, be said to be free? I know all societies do it, and that man has been at the mercy of accidents before control was established, but . . ."

"Oh, it's just like the weather control, boss; there were hell's own complaints at first, but people soon got used to human control" Macandrew's broad Lps spread in an easy grin.

"It's much more basic than that, of course," Vlakhov answered with a not very spontaneous looking smile, turning away from the thick polarized window. "The real point is that only real Watchdogs distrust the government and its actual practices much. But a lot of people are scared of the possible implications. There *are* arguments, even against present education, that strike me as sound. Custis, for instance, holds that explorations of certain fields of art, and indeed of psychology itself, have only been possible by people whose minds

were extremely warped and rigid by our standards Kafka, Proust, and so on."

"Lorimer," the brown man retorted, "you know as well as I do that we can't have crowds of even mild paranoids growing up with present-day weapons around. I wish we could psycho all the Watchdogs too! Meanwhile we've got to keep a very firm eye on them and any other dangers of the sort. Shoot first and tend the enemy's wounds afterwards!"

"That's it, of course" Vlakhov smiled much more convincingly "Emergency measures leave loose ends, but they have to wait. The difficulty is to persuade people that there are emergencies Only full-time philosophers can take responsibility for *everything*. We'll have to watch the propaganda side."

"Incidentally, boss," Macandrew said in a more professional voice, "Custis' remarks about art show what a good idea it was to keep PACIC secret until it's ready "

"You're right. When's the trial run, incidentally?"

"In a few hours, I believe. I've arranged for us to go over. Meanwhile, speaking of propaganda, you might read this"

'This' was an editorial from the *Lhasa Gazette* perhaps the most influential paper in the Asian capital. Not normally pro-Watchdog, it had now loosed off a closely-reasoned attack on the secret funds It conceded that the existence of the Bases, minor nuisance though they were, was some argument for keeping certain research temporarily secret, but questioned how much of the secret budget went into research and how much into unspecified and 'possibly unsavoury' secret-agent networks and so on At the same time it attacked the military budget mostly devoted to maintaining the Patrol as far too large.

"Yes, it's just one more sign," Vlakhov said "Just put me up a draft recommending a large allocation to the propaganda side tomorrow will you, Caleb?"

"Sure. Some edge has already been taken off the argument that we don't need such a big patrol by the Deimos business," Macandrew suggested.

"What Deimos business?"

"Oh, of course, you were asleep—I thought it wasn't worth giving you an alarm call. The whole thing is here—your top paper. Recordings are ready on the stereo if you need them."

The preliminary report of the raid indicated that the raiders' success might have been due to accident rather than sabotage. Only three small ships and a couple of hundred men had taken part. Fifty of these had been left, and two ships destroyed. All the wounded had committed suicide, no doubt under a psycho-compulsion, except one raider who had been shot in both arms. No information was to be got from him except for the fairly obvious fact that the raid had been mounted in the asteroids.

Faced with a straightforward piece of action, always more of his forte than general considerations, Vlakhov livened up again at once to his normal active self. His broad body seemed to lean into the typhoon of hard work and decisions with something of the musclebound strength of a champion hammer-thrower.

After a bit he looked up from the paper and said, "Tell Personnel Section to see if they can narrow down his Base's location by any sort of unconscious memory of star patterns and so on—there's not much chance though, I'm afraid."

Federation losses had been two hundred dead and wounded and a communications post destroyed. In fact the military side of the raid was of little importance, though the escape of even one raiding craft in the circumstances was a little disquieting.

But the important thing was the political and psychological estimate.

"You'll have to go through the military reports," Vlakhov went on, "and the effects on the press and on the air and on the public, and submit a draft report for me to put up to the Government. But as I see it tentatively, there'll be some irritation at the failure of our defences, but on the whole this will strengthen feeling in favour of the secrecy measures and the military vote. Propaganda are presumably working on it as planned?"

"Yes," Macandrew answered, walking over to the stereo. "If you want to hear this, you'll see that it has now been suggested that sabotage from within helped the raiders."

"Good. No, don't bother to show me." Vlakhov thought for a moment and added, "Perhaps there really was sabotage. An accidental leak of information plus an accidental slow up in the station sounds rather unlikely, except on the theory that

fortune favours the brave. But I'm thinking that there has been very little raider activity lately. Wouldn't you say that it could be a sideshow to direct attention from something bigger in preparation?" He looked up quizzically.

"I get you, Chief." Macandrew took out his notebook, and jotted something down. "I'll get Hartley to give me the Patrol's line on that."

Vlakhov turned to the next paper in his tray, a thick file headed 'Subversive Activity' He skimmed through it, finding that it was a two-page summary signed by Macandrew, with a dozen appendices condensing agents' reports

"Don't bother to read it," Macandrew said, "I've put it in that form in case you want to convince sceptical members of the Government the Minister of Culture, for instance It's just a proof that the Watchdogs, though a genuine enough organization, is also a front for a group of plotters."

"A proof? You've really got proof of it at last?"

"W-e-e-ell," Macandrew answered carefully, looking at his knuckles, "not really a proof, but I've angled it so that it appears like one for all practical purposes I haven't used the word proof, you'll see, and I specially say that no legal basis exists, so that they'll do best to leave it to us A few recent reports made our case strong enough to put this up, I rather think."

Vlakhov read the substantive pages intently. As he turned the page, Macandrew remarked, 'You'll see that there has been talk of action with large forces. What do you make of that?"

"I should say that it meant contact with the Bases. How could an organization on earth collect large forces? They may be speaking loosely, of course."

"They don't seem to be, it's from intercepts. We couldn't locate the senders unfortunately."

"Well, I'm virtually certain there's contact with the Bases anyhow. You'd better have a look at my appreciation meanwhile, take it out of my case."

Vlakhov went on reading After a few minutes Macandrew looked up and said, "Whew, Chief! You're really sold on the immediacy of some crisis?"

"No or, rather, it's only general guessing so far. I want

an all-out effort by your agents over the next few weeks." He handed the file back to his subordinate. "And I won't want to submit this to the Cabinet now, Caleb Keep it, we may want it later, especially if everything else fizzles out. Now give me that PACIC file. I need to get properly briefed before Schönstein arrives."

PACIC, without any military or secret service implications, was yet potentially the most controversial of all Vlakhov's numerous pigeons He was smiling slightly as he opened the report, already simplified sufficiently for Cabinet perusal if necessary For this was the project in which he felt the greatest creative interest. In all respects a tough, independent, short-view man, he got from it the compensation such natures need, a useful venture into philosophical realms. He read:

'PACIC (Psychological-Aesthetic Computer, Integrator and Creator is a three-stage electronic computer of sufficient size and complexity to handle the variables involved in:

Stage 1. Analysing brain-rhythms and trigger-word responses to an extremely subtle point, and on a mass scale.

Stage 2. Integrating them into an ability to select, for a given person (or group of persons of any size) the most effective types of aesthetic patterns.

Stage 3 Creating in one art form or another a suitably emotive object.

'The major difficulties have been with Stage 3. To take an example: it has involved, in painting, the reduction of Gestalt theory to numerical terms, a numerical basis for colour-effect, and other equally complicated investigations.

'PACIC is now in operation, though only in certain single productions, not all of which are yet successful. It is not possible to say at this stage how much further it can be developed.

'It was realized from the first that the existence of PACIC is likely to cause considerable upset among at least some of the artistically minded members of the population. It is felt that as things are it might be widely un-

popular, and it is recommended that secrecy continue at present.'

And how, Vlakhov thought, remembering Custis' remarks. He turned on to the most recent activities of PACIC.

Peggy's voice on the speaker announced softly, "Professor Schönstein is here."

"Show him in. . . . Hullo, Jeremy."

The fat, beaming little psychologist came waddling in.

"Come over to Thaetetus with me, Lorimer," he roared. "It's a psychological triumph – an aesthetic one too, up to a point. But we shall go further; we shall go further!" He held up his forefinger in emphasis, at the same time taking out a handkerchief to dab his forehead.

"I'm right with you," Vlakhov said, rising from his desk. He waved at the report and added, "You've done wonders, especially with such a small staff."

"Oh, it was mostly picking other people's brains," answered the scientist, "and we got all the equipment made outside without arousing suspicion – passed our orders through your security people, of course. Still, it's pretty good, even if I do say so. Come along."

"Just a moment." They had got into the lift in the anteroom and Vlakhov said, before shutting the door, "Peggy, if the photon test comes up while I'm over on PACIC, put it through to Schönstein's office, will you?"

Then they were plunging down three hundred feet into the lunar soil towards the subline – a time saver. Vlakhov had wheedled it out of 'expenses' by scheduling Thaetetus as future living quarters for an expanded H Q At first he had liked the journeys by crawler over the dust and rock of the surface, that strange, inhuman landscape of absolute light and shadow which some people find the most moving surroundings in the System But he had long since become bored with the waste of time and the bumping and was glad of the little tube.

Less than ten minutes later they were in Schönstein's office in Thaetetus When Vlakhov's predecessor, years ago, had settled on Aristillus as his Headquarters he had set up alternative offices in the two neighbouring craters of Cassini and Thaetetus, capable of taking over at once if Aristillus itself

had been blasted. This was just after the illusion of perpetual peace had been rudely shattered by the first of the raids from the Bases, and before adequate detences and patrols had been organized and the extent of the enemy's weakness understood.

Vlakhov kept Patrol Operations H.Q. (itself quite capable of carrying out his duties in an emergency) in Cassini and his own in Aristillus. This left Thaetetus free from unorthodox operations like PACIC.

The great bulk of the computers was sunk deep into the moon. Around his own offices Schonstein had set up the various 'Creation Rooms.' He led the way past one labelled 'P'. "That's for Painting," he explained, "but we'll go into 'V' — verse, first." He opened the next door.

Inside was simply a teletype machine and, on the wall, a huge panel of controls. "The general type of product is selected by the earlier, psychological stages," Schonstein rambled on. "The main computers special to this section of the third stage are a linguistic bank and a linguistic structural selector. We've got her set now to verse in an early twentieth-century style — not very interesting. So far we've had one poem which had three lines which repeat a female poet of the twenties verbatim. But when we turn the settings to what should imitate the better stuff it isn't very satisfactory, as yet anyhow. Still, we've already had a sonnet accepted by *Contemporary Poetry* — under a pseudonym of course."

"What do you want to do now?" Vlakhov asked.

"Let's try the thirties — a sonnet, say. At present we have to reject only about half of them for technical hitches — and every reject lets us refine the machine." He went to the wall and made some adjustments.

"I'm switching on. The computers will have to warm up first."

There was a pause for twenty or thirty seconds. The machine then started to tap out:

Struck timeless by a magic edge of horror,
Dismembered by those pities in the omen,
He strains though suffering of dream and woman
To break the dangerous endless inward mirror.
Yet no tradition warns him of tomorrow

To screw a homage out of the inhuman;
This drowning of the omen is uncommon—
A storm of flesh to persecute his sorrow.

A mask of parable can save his honour,
A bitter lameness limping from his kisses,
His brainflesh knuckled to a pure belief.
Yet better, chosen with a painful candour,
This sympathy crawls free from the abyss
To grow athletic from its grip on grief.

"Oh!" Vlakhov said finally, when the tapping had ceased. After a pause, he went on, "It has a certain energy, I must admit. I can well believe that one of the incomplete-emotion periods, as Martin Stahlberg calls them, might produce something like that."

The Professor, beaming with delight, replied, "The great thing is how well it hangs together. It doesn't mean much, but look at those words and images—all the same really, just a mixture of crude physical thrust and incomprehensible, quasi-metaphysical ideas like 'omen.' I don't greatly like that repetition of 'omen,' incidentally. Let's programme it for a new seventh line."

The new line was:

This drowning in the ritual cannot summon . . .

which Schönstein pronounced rather better, while conceding that he was not the expert in the period. "In fact, I sometimes come across words, or concepts, I don't understand at all. That machine has access to an enormous amount of information and imagery and all. The last bit it did was a sonnet like this, but beginning, if I remember right, '*Laying the anger to his hopeful bed*'; it was sent around with a fifty-page analysis showing the machine's brilliance in selecting words both on a psycho-emotional basis and for their rhythmic and general sound connections with surrounding words, and with the structure of the poem as a whole. And that was boiled down from a much fuller mathematical treatment by our group-theory man Braun!"

"Oh, I can see that the theorists are going to have the

most wonderful time with it. I just wonder how the *poets* will like it when you put the settings to here and now."

"They will have to lump it," Schonstein replied smugly. "I was a poet once myself, when I was a young lecturer at the Free British University at Ottawa in the seventies. But come to the office and I'll show you a few more—not the worst. My old poetic pride will not permit me to inflict on you PACIC's imitations of the 1940 Apocalypse poets, or the metaphysical-wit-men, or the blood-and-lions ladies, although they are more perfect reproductions of their models. No, this slightly more sensible level is a better test of the machine." He patted a bank of controls very gently and gingerly and added, "Any old huddle of transistors can imitate a thalamus alone or a cortex alone, but only old PACIC can manage the higher things!"

Back in the office he opened a bulging file and spread dozens of poems over the desk. He finally selected one, and Vlakhov started to read:

The streams grow more remote deeper the wood;
Smooth i the quiet fluctuatin blood
And we feel in the fum grey shadows of the brain
A hard knot formin, prophetic with pain . . .

After a while he asked, "What does 'deb' mean? Here's a verse which goes:

England's still a deb now, how can we tell her
Stories of the European Cinderella?'

"Deb, yes, I meant to look it up," Schonstein answered. "Short for 'debilitated person' perhaps? There were a queer lot of words of that sort then. But I told you PACIC is better educated than you or me!"

Vlakhov finally reached the last verse, beginning *'The trees hang tall. The stars grow le, distinct'* and remarked, "The trouble is, I find these exhaust me. I'll read the experts' views. But you'll have to give me something simpler, even if you don't feel it does your beloved cubic kilometre of relays justice."

"Oh, all right." The scientist had been fervently searching

through the typescript with as much pursed-lipped uncertainty as if he was a writer submitting his own work to some severe critic. He now produced a few more.

"Here's one that's a bit cruder a sort of war and love poem." Vlakhov read:

I looked at her photograph
While the bullets hummed like bees
Hoping to detect the core
Behind that Egyptian laugh
I was crouching on my knees
And my eyes were raw.

"Pretty soft, eh?" Schönstein mumbled, "But go ahead. . . ."

And I waited with a face
Like any other pretty girl's
Who could call the streams her own
And be a ruling race. . . .

It went on like this for quite a while. The next one began:

Before I came like a cormorant to this island

and ended:

Though from the sea the blown salt will easily cover
The snow will cover, the rock outshoulder
This green lunacy trying to be a lover
It irritates me as I grow older.

Vlakhov's final view was, "Yes, I can see these are pretty reasonable in a queer way or some of them at least," he added more conscientiously. "I like the line about birds '*wearing their wings away on the stiffening air*,' silly though it is really. Do you suppose it's a brand-new image, or was that sort of thing common?"

"I've no idea," the scientist shrugged.

"Well, anyway, Jeremy," Vlakhov went on, "while I don't profess to be the last word as a judge, I'm sure PACIC has

justified itself, technically at least. The principle is pretty clearly established We will now have to consider how to make the whole thing public. I want to hold that up for a month or so anyhow, so you'll have cleared up a lot more loose ends by then How's the painting side, for example?"

Schonstein, without a word, pointed impressively at the left-hand wall. A square metre of canvas hung there—a simple composition in a few quiet tones—greys and guitars.

"It's that old Cubist," Vlakhov said at once. "I can't recall the name—early twentieth century. It looks to me to be pretty good."

"Yes, it's a Braque. It's the first good thing PACIC's done. But we chose him pretty carefully a careful painter, but within a very limited set of variables: few colours, few shapes, very little in the way of complication. Of course it's difficult to judge how good it is of its sort, but our aesthetic people say it's all right. They don't know everything, though."

"Can I have it?" Vlakhov asked.

"Yes, if you want it," the other answered with some surprise "I like it myself, but we can duplicate it easily now its recorded."

The speaker called softly, "Professor Schönstein, here's a call for Mr. Vlakhov. Just a moment."

Peggy's face appeared on the stereo in its close crop of red hair. "Hayakawa is just starting," she said "Do you want to be on to him direct, or watch the drive from outside, from the journalists' liner?"

"Put him on direct."

She faded out and there was the Hawaiian instead, going through the last minutes of the check.

Then, after the briefest flash of intense light, the stereo went black. Peggy's face appeared again, looking shaken.

"What happened?" Vlakhov asked calmly.

"There's been a blow-up. I'll put you through to the liner."

"I hope she can get through," Vlakhov said, "if the liner's not gone too there's a chance it's not a bad bust."

After a long pause a patrol officer's face appeared on the screen. "Lieutenant Sillars, First Officer of the *Eurydice*," he said, "the Captain has gone over with a rescue party already. Any instructions before I give you a view of the wreck?"

"Yes," said Vlakhov, "tell the journalists this is a minor

setback. Martyrs to science if they're dead, and all that." He realized he wasn't speaking to his own people and his voice because less hard "Help keep the Project going, lad" The boy's face smiled a little and faded. In its place appeared a view of the Experimental Project.

It seemed, at first glance, that only the forepart had been blown in. There was a very good chance that few casualties had occurred. Then the lieutenant's voice said, "I'll put you through to the rescue party."

Captain Enders reported briefly, "There are two technicians killed and eighteen men badly injured. We just got to H-H in time. His heart and lungs are going and he's unconscious. The doctor has fixed him up temporarily and we'll send him and the others to Tycho hospital."

"Put a guard on the hulk, keep your patrols out and send all the fit Project members to work out what happened with Science Investigation Section at Patrol H Q. I won't keep you any longer," Vlakhov switched off.

He stood for a second and wiped his forehead.

"You should relax a little," Schonstein said in a surprisingly gentle voice. Vlakhov remembered that he was primarily a psychologist.

"I can't very well now," he said with a smile. "There are various jobs to be done today. Do you think I look as if I'll crack up?"

"No," Schönstein answered frankly, "there's not a chance. I was just thinking that you could physically do with a rest."

"Well, I'll take one in a few hours."

The speaker said, "A recorded message for Mr. Vlakhov from his secretary. It is now one half-hour before your appointment with the Watchdog delegation led by Mr. Sevillano."

"I must be off." The moment's shock seemed to have passed entirely and Schonstein shook his head admiringly as Vlakhov closed the lift doors and disappeared.

As Vlakhov stepped on to the little platform deep underground, he thought to himself that he was being useful in the organization and co-ordination of projects run by men who, though of greater attainments, were not capable of keeping things running, taking decisions or—in some cases—being more than children in political ideas. It was a satisfying thought, even though he had never been the type to nourish

childish hero-worship for the work of geniuses, any more than he felt any conscious superiority to the skilled rankers of the Patrol. These were simply attitudes which never entered his head.

The doors of the little four-man shuttle closed behind him and with a very faint whine the motor started to hurl it at almost jet speeds through the evacuated kilometres of the tube between the craters. Taking Schonstein's advice, Vlakhov went to sleep at once. When the car reached half-way and started to brake, the chair automatically turned in the other direction, and Vlakhov scarcely noticed the switch through his doze. Three minutes later the car stopped and its doors opened to the Aristillus platform. With an effort he woke himself up and got into the lift.

As he entered his anteroom Peggy said, "The delegation is already here. I told them that you would be ready in ten minutes. They don't know about the explosion — in case you don't want to tell them."

"Good girl. It would only give them something more to bait me about. They can't very well come back and tease me about it afterwards. I suppose I can't have a drink before I see them? No, they'd smell it and tell all their adherents about orgies. In fact I'm afraid you look a bit too decorative yourself, Peggy."

"What nonsense!" The girl was blushing noticeably in her rather becoming freckled way. "They're not really a bunch of puritans."

"Not in their talk, I admit, but inspect their private lives. Well, if you've locked up my papers, show them in right away. And let me know if H-H is all right as soon as you find out."

He went in and sat down at the desk, but rose as the delegation entered. There were three of them, headed by old Andrew Sevillano himself, and including Richard O'Hara, the organization's general secretary, and Gammons, the press chief and editor of *Argus*. Macandrew introduced them formally and sat down beside Vlakhov.

When they were seated Vlakhov said, "Gentlemen, although I know you do not see eye to eye with us in certain of our activities, we are always glad to receive you and to take your criticisms into account, for we recognize the high purposes to

which the Freedom and Vigilance League is devoted. And the Government is glad to respect your democratic right to approach us."

O'Hara was fidgeting with irritation at this speech. But Sevillano acknowledged it with a gracious bow of his head.

"And now," Vlakhov went on, "I wonder if you are presenting the same arguments again—always worth hearing and it's good for all of us to be reminded occasionally of the other man's opinion—or is there some fresh trouble?"

Sevillano leant forward in a dignified fashion and spoke. "Mr. Vlakhov, I have every respect for your ability, but not for your long-sightedness, as you know. Did you hear my speech on the stereo a few hours ago?"

"I'm afraid I didn't. It's recorded and I'll be listening to it in an hour or so," Vlakhov replied.

"Well, mostly I spoke about the dangers of psychological controls in education—which is not the business of your own department, Mr. Vlakhov—but I will not weary you with the arguments you will hear expressed better in the stereocast. I would only urge you earnestly to listen to that. But there are other matters. This secret development of a 'photon drive' as you call it. What does it all mean and why was it secret? And then there is the question of the Deimos raid. The whole thing is so incredible that it is widely considered in some circles to have been a put-up job on the part of the Government, to arouse feeling against that negligible quantity, the so-called 'Bases,' and hence to provide support to further funds for your department. I do not assert this myself and would only ask for the Government's assurance that is is not so. And, thirdly, it is strongly reported that, among the many unknown—and hence undemocratic projects sponsored by your department there is a psychological one. It is said to be producing, or to have produced, a machine capable of causing psychological effects of a deep and lasting nature over masses of people simultaneously. I would like your comments on that too."

Vlakhov had been studying the faces of the three visitors. This confirmed him in the idea that though neither of the other men was negligible, O'Hara was a really tough nut. However, with his obsessions, he must have a weakness somewhere. The Government would never be shaken by this crew,

so long as they kept their wits about them. He now answered Sevillano in a courteous and, he hoped, convincing fashion.

"Thank you, sir. That was very straightforward and to the point. The photon drive development was kept secret under a government directive, to ensure that basic research does not reach the Bases. It is precisely this, in our experts' opinion, which keeps the Bases far enough behind us to be only, as you say, a minor nuisance. Even so we have been perturbed lately at signs that they possess comparatively advanced devices, such as enabled one of their raiders to escape from Deimos. As to your extraordinary remarks about the Deimos raid, I am sure no responsible person would credit such things. I don't propose to deny it formally. Gammons here would make a fine misleading headline out of 'Government denies.' We are taken aback by the raid ourselves, but it took place so recently that we haven't yet been able to form more than the most tentative conclusions. A report will be issued later."

Gammons exclaimed with some heat, "You've had time to put it about that the raiders had help from inside saboteurs. Now you admit that any conclusions are premature. In fact that was just dirty propaganda."

"Not at all," Vlashov answered. "We'd already had some reason to believe that such connections, which we'd always thought most improbable, existed after all. The circumstances of the raid justify it being put forward as a probability — which was all that we have said."

Gammons only muttered something about an evasion, so Vlashov went on. "As to your third point. There is no such machine as you mention. Certain psychological work is on the secret list, for the same reasons as I have given for some physical research being in that category."

Sevillano looked at him shrewdly and then rose, saying, "Well, although it seems a short interview, I feel that there is no reason for us to go over the same points again. We maintain our protest and claim the community's right not to have all this secrecy. But there is not much point in you and I listening to each other repeat our views — all that ever happens at these interviews, as far as I can see. I've got to go over to Tycho to see an old friend, anyhow. I don't often get to the Moon nowadays."

"Will you have a drink before you go?"

"No, thank you."

"You'll use your own jet, I suppose? Are your passes checked for the outward journey from this H.Q.? Caleb, mark them up as they go out, will you?"

This was an unavoidable mention of their electronic passes. These hateful symbols of the secrecy surrounding Vlakhov's H.Q. were designed to permit access past the outer detection area by means of the amplification of individual brain-rhythm patterns and so actually meant the ignominy of one at least of the pass-holders having to strap the metal-plastic strip round his forehead on approach. Vlakhov wondered who had been the victim—probably the volatile Gammons.

All three looked frosty at this unwelcome reminder, and O'Hara even seemed to be gathering himself for a bitter outburst. But Macandrew had ushered them out before anything was said.

When Macandrew came back, Vlakhov said to him, "I didn't like that third question—it was almost certainly based on some rumour about PACIC. Indeed, although they've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, it's true that it could probably produce some sort of strong psychological effects—and over the stereo could reach the masses. I know it's nonsense, but you can imagine what the Watchdogs would make of it! Things would be worse than we were thinking when we considered it just in terms of amazing the artists."

"Yes. I don't know what we can do about it." The mulatto looked dubious.

"Tighten security on PACIC, that's all. Did you watch O'Hara?"

"Yes, it was plainly his show, in a way. And his main interest was very obviously the PACIC rumour, though he paid considerable attention to what you really thought of the alleged Bases-Deimos sabotage link."

"You know, I can't help feeling he's dangerous," Vlakhov said thoughtfully. "I know he sometimes reasons childishly, but he's a strong character in a way. Is there really nothing on him?"

"No. He's one of my top suspects. But my men can't find anything against him. He goes to such lengths to evade hypnotics and not have his movements watched. In fact, to be honest, it's his evasion of my men that makes me suspect him.

And that could merely be a passion for avoiding the authorities' eye—you can't call it paranoid, for we really are watching him."

"Well," Vlakhov concluded, "I don't like his visit here. It looks too much like a reconnaissance of our information. Put double the number of men on to him, and don't bother me with any complaint about how few you've got. I know all about that."

"All right, Chief," and Macandrew went out of the room.

Peggy came in and laid out Vlakhov's papers again, at the same time saying, "H-H is alive. Artificial heart and lungs are taking care of his circulation. He's down with intense shock and complete psycho-breakdown. They'll be performing a reconstruction. You will be welcome tomorrow at the hospital —Tycho D —any time after twenty hours."

"All right. Make arrangements, will you? Oh, and you might get hold of Custis and Stahlberg, in case they want to come and see him too."

Vlakhov sat down again at his desk and opened his next file:

'A Research Project on the Possibility of Operating Conversion Fields to Create Adequate Atmospheres on Otherwise Airless Planets.'

He settled back with an interested expression to read through the report.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Next day Macandrew reported, "My men lost O'Hara again. He was away for two days. I had four men on him, but it isn't difficult to shake off someone if you use a skimmer instead of an honest stratojet that shows on the public screens. O'Hara isn't the only one either. Three or four of my favourite suspects have been out of sight, or moving about meeting too many people for me to follow. I'm sure there's something up. Why don't you let me pull them all in? That would break it up for sure."

"No." Vlakhov put aside the tempting thought. "It would only hold it up for now. We couldn't hold them, and all that would happen is that we'd get into bad odour. The Government might even have to sack us—or stand an inquiry, which would be worse. The only thing is to do the best you can."

"I've lost an agent too," Macandrew went on uneasily. "Andreu, who had been getting very close and trusted by Guzman—the man I think is their No. 1 in Cuzco."

Vlakhov thumbed through his papers in silence for a few minutes, then looked up and said, "And Patrol reported when you were out. Not only was there that extremely bold reconnaissance of our Ceres Base, but now they've carried out a fusion torpedo attack on Mars, six missiles, all nullified by our defences before they reached the atmosphere, but only just. And there's a freighter missing on the Io run—that's a lot of activity for a week."

The mulatto strode leggily to the window and looked up into the jet-black zenith, saying, "It's a bit of a strain waiting for it—something will happen soon, you're damn right. And I sometimes feel that it will be something coming out of the sky and blowing our roof off. I wouldn't like to breathe that black stuff."

"Oh, come now!" Vlakhov laughed heartily. "If they got as far as breaking the defences here, that will prove they've practically won. Suppose they got through the detectors – they've still a colossal job to blast into here or Cassini. They could get Thaetetus, I suppose, but that wouldn't be worth their while."

"I didn't like that stereo of the Deimos Post," Macandrew went on. "Chief, why don't you let me shoot O'Hara and his friends accidentally—or give them a strato accident?"

"Of course not!" Vlakhov was genuinely perturbed at a man like Macandrew showing even these temporary and natural signs of strain. But none of them had any real experience of this sort of plot and counterplot. The same applied to the Watchdog conspirators, of course. If it came to that even the Patrol lacked experience, if it ever came to real space-fighting. A space-battle is impossible if either side wants to avoid it –at least with present detectors and accelerations tolerable to man and weapon. And there had never been one on any scale.

The strain was beginning to tell on Vlakhov himself. But it was just something to be shrugged off. Responsibility was his job, and he proposed to go ahead with it.

Macandrew turned around and said, "Sorry, Chief. I'm behaving like a schoolgirl – or worse, for schoolgirls nowadays are as cool as cucumbers. You should see my daughter . . . She's done psychosemantic control exercises since she was eight and now you can't faze her. In fact she'd do my job better than I'm doing it," he concluded glumly.

"Nonsense, you do miracles with your few dozen raw operatives. It's a good thing to blow off occasionally and you'd far better do it with me than with your subordinates."

Vlakhov rose and added, "We have to play it this way. Don't worry, we'll fix our opponents once and for all if and when the show starts."

It was highly probable that they would. But still, even the

faintest possibility of failure was a horrible burden. Could he take any further steps?

The best thing he could do was take his mind off the matter and go and see Hayakawa. Custis would be along soon.

* * *

The atmosphere in the great hospital section of Tycho is kept at an optimum of pressure and oxygen content deduced from analysis of the success of mountain hospitals on earth. Most of the cases are heart, but many of these have lung complications as well.

Ever since space-flight became general, the treatment of heart conditions has centred on the Moon, where the strain on that organ is so much less owing to the lower gravity. But Tycho is also a celebrated psychiatrical centre.

Before John Custis and Lorimer Vlakhov went in to see Hayakawa the specialist in charge, Dr Abel, described the patient's condition:

"His heart and lungs are gone, but we've rigged up portable artificials double in case of failure. They're the latest job and the circulation people are rather proud of them they fit perfectly snugly into his thorax. He'll be four or five centimetres broader chested than before, but that's all the difference it should make Of course there's a slight possibility that it might affect his going on this star trip, but we can decide that later."

"I'm certain he'll absolutely insist on going, unless you can definitely say the artificial organs will wear out—even then he'd probably take a dozen spares," Vlakhov remarked. "Don't you agree, John?"

Custis seemed sunk in one of his worrying moods, and for a moment it seemed that he might be going to ask the doctor to 'do everything possible' for Hayakawa. Fortunately he only said, "Yes, I do indeed"; adding rather half-heartedly, "I'd almost like to go myself."

Very surprised, Vlakhov asked, "Why?"

"Because of those Martian artefacts. If there really weren't any native Martians, then or so I've begun to think perhaps it was the art of a colony from some other star-system."

"That's certainly an idea," Dr. Abel put in, "and it will be

an interesting point to put to Professor Hayakawa when he regains consciousness. It's a good thing to give the brain something to grow on when it's reconstituted. If you care to watch the final stages of the operations you can come in with me when Dr. Desmond, who's on the penultimate shift, calls me in."

"We'd like to very much." It was Custis who spoke, in a curiously determined voice.

"You'll be wanting to see the personality-changing techniques, of course?" Vlakhov said quizzically. He turned to the doctor and went on, "Like most laymen, John is rather uneasy about psychological controls. I am myself, even, I must admit, though not to the same extent as a lot of others."

"I never quite understand the attitude," Abel replied. "It probably originates with the mass psychoing of all those fixated apparat types. But that was a very different matter. A lot of them were cured properly, even though hastily, of a vicious imbalance. And the others were given counterbalancing compulsions—obsessions against inhuman conduct, for example. But our work here is quite different. We reconstruct the whole personality."

"And you don't think that could become an instrument of tyranny?" Custis put in.

"I don't see what you mean," the doctor said in a puzzled tone. "We are all tested psychologically and known to be incapable of anti-social use of our techniques, and we work under very strict directives."

"No, I mean if the techniques got into the hands of irresponsible political leaders."

Abel looked at Custis helplessly. "But that's a political question—and surely we have enough security regulations already to stop knowledge getting into wrong hands. It's a great nuisance, I assure you," he said, turning to Vlakhov, "and after all compulsive methods of a pretty thorough sort seem to be available to the Bases anyhow."

This answer, unsatisfactory to both views, might have provoked further discussion, but at that moment the wall speaker said, "Desmond here. Can you come and take over, Dr. Abel?"

"Can we come? We won't disturb you?"

Abel rose unhurriedly, and handed them a couple of white coveralls from a cupboard.

"Oh, we're quite used to distinguished visitors. President Hu was in the heart wing for a month a couple of years ago. You remember — when he had his checkup? Though, to my mind he wasn't nearly as distinguished as his G.P."

"Dr. Kizer?", Custis said, zipping up his coverall. "I saw him the other day. He really does look the part, doesn't he?"

Dr. Abel smiled. "Don't be misled by his appearance. He's as bright as they come. Very interested in our work, in spite of all that character-actor beetling eyebrows stuff—but a rigid old conservative, just the same. Come along then."

They went down a corridor. In a room on the left, Hayakawa lay on a white couch. Little speakers were plugged into his ears, and hundreds of electric leads came from his scalp to a large instrument, with several dozen stereos and two-dimensional videoscreens in the corner of the room. Another doctor stood watching intently over a control board, where a younger man was making a few adjustments.

As they waited silently for him to finish, the voice from Hayakawa's earplugs sounded faintly in the room: "The feathery trees fringe the golden beaches. Lie and look up into the deep, deep blue. The deep brown women warm you with love. The golden air, the golden sands, the golden breasts. . ." It changed into an unknown language.

"Japanese," said Abel, "the Professor is a Hawaiian of Anglo-Japanese descent and bilingual. For some purposes the maternal language is superior — the speakers provide the subjective, semantic, component of the therapy, of course. That paragraph's significance was pretty obvious."

The other doctor finally turned from the controls, and said, "I should give him a few minutes before you start the final adjustment, Abel. The subjective basics should help smooth out one or two knots in that time."

"This is Director Vlaskov, Mr. Custis — Dr. Desmond."

"How do you do? You'll excuse me if I go straight off. I'm overdue at a conference. The assistant will carry on with your programming."

Abel waved the others to a couple of armchairs. He himself sat down comfortably, but they both remained perched at

the edge of a seat. The presence of their incomplete friend on the white couch was distracting and moving.

Abel said, "I shall have time to tell you what I'm going to do, after all. It's much more illuminating that way than seeing some incomprehensible actions and finding out what they were afterwards."

"Oh, good"; Vlakhov was the answerer.

"Well, Hayakawa was very badly shocked. The brain structure is, fortunately, pretty well all right, though a trifle disorganized, but he has completely blown up mentally. We are reconstructing his personality as if from scratch."

"You might just as well give someone a brand-new personality," said Custis, looking at the machinery with disaste.

"Oh no, that would be much more difficult. The mind tends to reform on its old lines, or, to express it in physical terms, the neutrons tend to regrow along their old tracks.

"Hayakawa was a tense type whose brashness was rooted in childhood difficulties We don't propose to change any of that, incidentally. He has had some days of relaxation and sedation and we have done most of the work of reconstruction. His old psycho-charts were on file, and now there only remains the business of getting the detail of his brain-rhythms identical with previous recordings. It's rather a delicate task We run rhythms from a large number of cross-sections and under various stimulations on the screens, in turn, and impose them on his aberrant ones by resonation. That's mostly been done, but some are specially recalcitrant, and I'm going to deal with those now. Ready, Jack?"

"Yes, doctor." The young assistant turned from his place with a smile to the visitors, and Abel walked over and took a place beside him.

"All right, give us his D.D 27, under K-excitement." On one of the screens a jagged red line fluoresced, rising and falling as rhythmically as breathing.

"Put his old one on," Abel continued.

A green line appeared, following the same beat To Vlakhov and Custis it seemed identical with the other. But the assistant said, "Dr. Abel says look at the left peak."

"Mm, yes, pretty bad. How many times has he run it?"

"About a hundred, with no improvement."

"Keep it on, and I'll try a freezer." Abel took up an instru-

ment like a pencil, fitted it into guides drawn down from the ceiling, and placed it carefully against Hayakawa's left temple.

"On," he said, after a final turn of a microadjuster. The red line became flat on the screen. "I'll give it twenty seconds ... Off."

The red line started to beat again Both psychologists looked at the screen once more. "A definite improvement, we'll try two more."

But one repetition of the process proved enough.

Most of the dozen remaining alterations were as easily overcome, but on two occasions a larger machine was hooded over Hayakawa's head.

"The first time this has happened," Abel explained to the visitors; "we can't quite manipulate the neurons directly — that'll come soon But we can either freeze a small area, to stop all action and inhibit the false rhythms, as I was doing, or do what I'm doing now, plant a very small shot of hypnin or some other suitable drug directly at a synapse or two This contraption does the estimating and manipulation, it's microsurgery with a vengeance and I can't do it for certain even with the micro's. But I can programme this device a dozen times till I get it just right, and then it does the work." He paused and leant back. "That's done. Run that one again in thirty seconds, Jack."

And the work went on.

A couple of hours later, Abel was finally satisfied. Telling the assistant to run some recorded trigger-word tests, and report with them when ready, he led Vlakhov and Custis back to the office.

"Lucky Martin Stahlberg couldn't be found," Custis commented. "I don't think he'd really have liked to see all that. It makes me feel a little depressed myself."

"Really? Why?" Abel's confidence in argument, which had not been high when they had been talking in here before, seemed to have become stronger. "It's a marvellous advance already in twenty years it'll be easier still "

"I just don't like seeing even this one way usefully practiced I agree—of manipulating people's psychological make-up. Not that that's what Martin wouldn't have liked. He

wouldn't like the general specialist atmosphere," Custis replied.

Abel's laughter was interrupted by the speaker, with a message for Vlakhov from Peggy. "Mr. Stahlberg's on the line."

"Put him through. Hullo, Martin. I'm sorry we couldn't get hold of you. Do you want to come up and see me and then come over here and visit H-H?"

"Just what I do want." Stahlberg's reply came three seconds later—a nuisance in all Earth-Moon conversations due to the limitations of communication at the speed of light. "I can't talk for long. I'm just coming in for a landing on Capri."

"Well, there's no hurry now. H-H is out of danger. Come any day after tomorrow; I'll be looking forward to seeing you. Make an appointment with Peggy. I'll give John a pass for you. Good-bye for now. By the way, who's the new girl? John says 'Hullo'. Out."

"You were talking about secrecy," Custis said to Abel. "Is any of this secret?"

"No, or only a few technical details. Roughly speaking any new development is kept secret until it's been examined properly by Vlakhov's people for its possible political dangers."

"I still see all this, both the psychology and the secrecy, as a potential menace," Custis said, mainly to Vlakhov. "I know you, but, even so, I'm not sure how I'd vote in the next election. And a lot of people feel the same way, except that you're a sort of symbolic devil to them."

"What do you think a new government could do?" Vlakhov asked. "Abolish secrecy and let the Bases get really strong? Abolish certain lines of research and have people doing it clandestinely? Cancel the educational programme and have the next generation run into a war fought with conversion bombs?"

"I don't admit your conclusions; the Bases might get a little stronger, but they'd never be a real menace. Your other points are even more unlikely." Custis spoke with some asperity.

"Well, let me tell you my views about a change of government. You see an alternative batch as bigger idealists. I see them as people who really might misuse the powers of my

department." Vlakhov turned to Abel with a smile. "There's no need to mind our rude tones to each other, doctor, we're very old friends."

Custis said, but less hotly than before, "Just because you saved my life once, don't think I'm bound to agree with you! I didn't mention a change of government; enough pressure on this one should do the trick. But nor do I admit that even a Watchdog government, which is obviously impossible, would be as bad as you say. There may be doubtful types among them, but they're mostly as good as anyone. Just because you disagree with their programme you label them potential tyrants."

Vlakhov did not answer but, after a pause looked at his watch and said, "Doctor, will Hayakawa be conscious today?"

"Yes. If you like I'll revive him for a few minutes as soon as I've had a look at the tests they're doing now. As a matter of fact I promised a journalist she could see him when he was brought round: handsome girl too . . But I'll ask about the tests." He flipped a switch. "Hullo, Jack. How's it going? Oh that's enough for a reasonable first check. Bring them in."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The assistant came in a minute or so later with a couple of tapes and a page or two of foolscap. Abel slipped the tapes into a slot in his desk and took up the paper. He put on a pair of earphones, turning to Custis and Vlakhov with a smile, remarking, "Professional etiquette. This will take twenty minutes or so. I hope you can wait. Talk as much as you like, I can't hear you with this thing on," and he took up the papers and started work.

Vlakhov took out a copy of the new issue of *Selene*; Peggy had apparently slipped it in his pocket. He said to Custis, "I meant to read Martin's new article that he was talking about so loudly at dinner the other day."

Custis answered, "At any rate it's on a subject he really knows properly. In fact I think a lot of his attitude is based on his horror of the idea that our culture might get back to the position in the seventies."

Vlakhov was looking at the semi-stereoscopic cover of the magazine and asked, "What about *Selene*?"

"Oh, it's edited by a bunch of people in Luna City, over in the other hemisphere. That's typical — a place they can't even *see* the Earth from. I'm sure it has a bad effect, unconsciously anyhow. Culture must be rooted in the home planet, or it'll get an artificial atmosphere as unreal as your air in the domes."

Whatever the trend of the abstract argument, Vlakhov has-

tened to defend the domes' air. "Damn it, you breathe as well on the Moon as anywhere else."

"You know what I mean." Custis leant forward in his chair, as if considering his words for a moment, but only added, "Anyhow, *Selene* may be fashionable and brilliant, and print Martin's stuff, and share his notions of an all-round culture. But it doesn't blend a lot of elements together, as I suppose Martin intends. It's just a ragbag."

He pointed to the magazine and went on, "I bet it's just the same—a political-history article by Martin, some poems, some notes on psycho-semantics, an essay on a mathematical rigour of literature, a note on painting and symbolic logic, a bit linking anthropology with impacts in modern society, and a science-fiction story."

"Not bad," Vlakhov replied, looking at the contents page. "Only wrong in detail. But what's wrong with that sort of approach?"

"It's just overdone" (deep in the argument, Custis had lost his hospital visitor's tenseness), "it's so much fighting on the winning side. All this unification of culture stuff was being established while we were still in the occupation army. For instance, what's the point of having a science-fiction story?"

"To help loosen up literary thinking, the first editorial said, I think," Vlakhov replied unexpectedly to the rhetorical question.

"Yes, but that isn't a battle that needs to be fought these days. All literature is more or less science-fiction now. The old style stuff—sensitive, style-minded, observant, psychological, and *only* that—is virtually extinct. It was only a temporary aberration anyhow. A story writer who didn't know that the future was different from the present, and one society from another, can hardly exist, since they developed those techniques for developing the mentally retarded. Even people like myself," Custis added with a certain fervour, "are aware of the existence of other worlds, and of the possibilities in every direction of Henry Hayakawa's star voyages."

He paused, distracted a moment by the mention of Hayakawa, and looked at Dr. Abel, who was quietly muttering to himself. "Fair—hair, Point—star." But he continued a little more quietly, "Science-fiction in its narrow sense—work devoted mainly to possibility exploration—doesn't need rubbing

in any more. Ordinary writing can be trusted not to get too narrow."

"What do you think of its reproductions of paintings?" Vlakhov had opened the magazine's middle pages

Custis replied, "Much better –they don't know anything about painting and play safe The thing is, *Selene* has a great vogue but it's mostly among people our age. The young ones will be specializing again—not on a basis of ignorance of other fields, like the off-century, but just because they prefer it. And it's better in the long run, I think."

"Care for the rest of it, while I look at Martin's article?" Vlakhov tore the article out and handed the remaining sheets to his friend, who thanked him, though with a certain moody superiority.

Vlakhov himself settled down to read the article—'Political Techniques of the Yaytsevists in Consolidating their Rule in England' It was written, rather to Vlakhov's surprise, in a style which, though it had a kind of old-world charm, was really rather dull and heavy, being redolent of the officialese of the previous century No doubt Stahlberg had soaked it up too much in reading masses of contemporary official papers. And at least it gave a very period air to the piece.

Vlakhov was interrupted by Custis saying, "Well, I must admit this isn't a bad poem " Vlakhov looked over his shoulder and was surprised to see that the poem started·

The streams grow more remote, deeper the wood.

It was indeed one of the PACIC poems Schonstein had shown him Really the old man's effrontery was astonishing. But all he said to Custis was, "Not bad—but it seems a bit gloomy."

"Well, why not?" that not very cheerful individual answered happily.

"I've been reading quite a lot of poetry lately," Vlakhov said, thinking it apropos. He did not add that most of this reading had taken place in Schonstein's office

"Really? I thought you hadn't got time to do more than enough not to get a reputation as . . ."

"Go on, don't be polite, say it moron' -I know as well as you do that it's—what did that Government circular say the other day?—'the best exercise for the human faculty

of evaluation, since it is the only form of communication which simultaneously provides intellectual, emotional and sensuous stimuli'. That definition wouldn't apply to a lot of poetry—that sonnet you've just shown me, for instance."

"True enough," Custis conceded.

"Anyhow," Vlakhov continued, "I really haven't time, any more than I can manage the twice-weekly game of tennis my doctor recommends. Fortunately I'm one of those people who can do without exercise—physical *or* intellectual-emotional!"

"Maybe," the artist replied. "It's a pity we don't know any poets though—unless you count that leopard-woman of Martin's—she writes her own scripts, and they're often in rhyme." He turned the page over to a reproduction of one of the lesser-known Blakeway landscapes of Mercury.

Vlakhov thought that Custis was showing remarkable patience at the rather lengthy wait imposed on them in these not very pleasant circumstances. No doubt the comparatively impersonal conversation had a calming effect.

In the rather thick quietness of the doctor's office, with the other two men absorbed each in his own way, Vlakhov felt the normal clarities of his thought blur, in a vague uneasiness, until the horrible days of the sixties so brilliantly detailed and focused in Stahlberg's article seemed to merge with the tension and the expected, looming violences of the present.

He shook the thought off. Sanity had won, even in the last century. And although even he was inadequately qualified to bear the strain of this sort of thing, the same amateurishness applied to the plotters.

What was more hampering was the public atmosphere of uninformed goodwill, like a swamp round the legs of the Government, effectively blocking preventive action and making sure that the enemy would have the initiative.

Still, it might be better this way, though good men would die by violence to teach the public a lesson, in a manner that had been unknown for decades except in the outposts where the Patrol fought its inconclusive battle against the raiders.

He read on,

". . . typical intellectual's mistake about history. They always think current trends are going to continue. In the

sixties they all thought that because Khrushchev was milder than Stalin, his successor just had to be milder still. Of course, it might have happened that way. But on the whole, upsets and changes and reversals and surprises, not simple and easily foreseeable evolutions, are the stuff of history."

Civilization had lived on its luck, over the past century. So many things might have gone wrong and given the Earth to the totalitarians. Luck had saved it. Vlakhov remembered reading in school an essay by the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historian Bury who, after a close analysis of the fall of the Western Empire, had been compelled to attribute it to bad luck, it had been a near thing, and the absence of minor incidentals here and there had determined the end. In the same way luck had enabled Byzantium to survive the great Muslim siege of the early eighth century, and go on for another five hundred years.

Bad luck could still destroy civilization. Good luck might, if all went well, mean that it was finally out of danger, that there would be no further crises—in fact that such jobs as Vlakhov's own would become superfluous.

Dr. Abel at last looked up and said to the assistant, in a voice full of satisfaction, "Good enough! I've marked a dozen questions we'll have to follow up, but even at most the deviation is very minor. We can correct tomorrow if it's really necessary. Meanwhile, will you take the electrodes off and wake him."

"O.K., doctor."

As the youngster went out Abel said, "They'll move him into the room opposite, a much more cheery place. He'll be in a proper bed, and it's well decorated. There's even a window—not much view, I'm afraid, but a fine crop of purple vacu-lichen on a boulder outside. We're right at the edge of the dome, fortunately."

A further wait of a quarter of an hour for the move to be carried out and the waking to occur was passed innocuously in a vague conversation about the origins of vacu-lichen, Custis maintaining with a minimum of evidence that, like his supposed Martians, it was not native to the satellite.

At last they went in. Custis repressed an obvious shudder, presumably at the hospital's idea of artistic decoration. But Hayakawa was sitting up.

"Hullo, Lorimer. Hullo, John. Where's this?"

"Tycho Hospital," Abel said, "You were . . ."

"Blown up on the Project," The physicist interrupted. "Was it bad?"

"No one was worse injured than you and you're O.K. now."

"No, no. I mean the Project."

"No," Vlakhov said, "it was quite a small explosion. I told them to send me an analysis of what went wrong and I'll push a copy right over to you as soon as it arrives."

"And don't start working on it now, Professor Hayakawa," Dr. Abel intervened. "You'll go back to sleep in a few minutes anyhow. The reviver will have dissolved by then."

"All right," Hayakawa answered with surprising mildness, "but I'm quite sure everything can be made foolproof, and I want to go back and do it quick. We'll never get to the stars at this rate. So you sawbones had better hurry up."

"Who's the girl-friend who wants to see you?" Custis asked.

"Girl-friend?"

"A journalist."

"I don't know. I've never met a girl journalist unless it's Cecily Askerton of the *Argus*, but that's hardly likely. I . . ." His voice became slower and he sank back into the pillows.

Abel turned to the others and said, "Well, that's all."

"Thank you very much, Dr. Abel. I hope you'll give me a call when he's ready to start again. And come over to Aristillus and have dinner sometime in a couple of weeks' time."

"That'll be towards dawn, won't it? Yes, I'd love to."

As Custis and Vlakhov left the building, the former said, "Lorimer, I've never been on the Moon in a vacuum suit. Would it be possible to walk over to your launch instead of going through one of those bloody retractable tubes or whatever they are?"

They were now on one of the little streets of Tycho City. The hospital was right up at the wall of one of the half-dozen plastic polarizing domes which formed the settlement. Through the roof, forty metres above, the last oblique rays of the sun shone softly. At the zenith hung, as always, the great gibbous globe of the Earth, with cool brilliance, even in

its present phase giving the equivalent in light of fifty full moons seen from its own surface.

Vlakhov answered, "Yes, I suppose so. Haven't been out myself for years. We'll go over to the Port office."

Ten minutes later they were standing on the powdery lava of the Moon's surface. Behind them, filling only a small part of the great crater, were the domes of the settlement. Right and left till it disappeared over the horizon, ran the great jagged wall of Tycho's rim. In front of them twenty or thirty crafts of various sizes lay, anchored to the hub of an underground entry point by flexible and movable pressure-corridors.

Both men looked up at the Earth only for a moment, and then down at the jagged brownish-grey landscape. Custis stirred the dust with his toe. Both of them, even in this safe spot, only a few yards from old-established settlements, felt, as one must, something of that awe and triumph which came over Hoskins and Da Silva when they stood, for the first time in human history, on the soil of another and highly alien celestial body only fifty miles south of this spot, and which is recorded so simply in the tapes found in their cairn.

There had been people who had not understood that interplanetary exploration and the rest of the great renaissance were not entirely separable developments; that Shakespeare and Drake go together.

There had not yet been a Camoens.

Vlakhov and Custis walked over to the launch by the little-used pathway. They entered by the emergency lock, as the main one was still linked to the control tower.

Vlakhov took off his suit and sat in the control seat. Soon he was giving mass and other details to his home controller at Aristillus. After Tycho had detached him and cleared him, the automatics at Aristillus blasted the craft off the ground at a gentle half 'g'.

Half an hour later they were drinking coffee in Vlakhov's office.

"I shall have to go now, Lorimer," Custis remarked, "I've got to open an exhibition this evening at Hampton Court. It's really rather striking stuff, Blakeway's new paintings of the Syrtis Major and other Martian areas. He's always needed

a subject. His best things so far have been those nudes, and look how dull his abstracts are."

"By the way," Vlakhov said, opening his desk, "here's a picture I wanted to give you that someone in the department gave me. I asked if they minded my giving it to you and they said they'd be delighted."

"It's a Braque, quite a good one by the look of it. Just what I need for my west room. Thanks very much, Lorimer. There aren't many of them around, such a lot were burned when the Soviets besieged Paris. Where . . ."

"Oh, and here's a pass for Martin Stahlberg to enter the area," Vlakhov interrupted hurriedly. "You've got yours, haven't you? I hope you'll be here again when H-H is better. Don't get them mixed up, the outer guard circuits wouldn't admit anyone on another man's. Clever things—another secret my department has managed to keep from the world, for no one's managed to forge one yet. And coercion or hypnosis untune them."

"Well, I don't like them and that's that," said Custis, putting the metal-and-plastic strip into his wallet, "but I'll let Martin have the right one."

"I'll get your launch programmed for London. It's been serviced, so you can take off right away."

When Custis had gone, Vlakhov thought for a while and then called in Macandrew.

The indefatigable mulatto came in with his usual grin and "Hullo, Chief!"

"Caleb, two things. First, tell me what you know about Cecily Askerton—if you know anything; otherwise look her up. I know your perfect memory."

"I know about her," Macandrew answered. "Clever as hell, complete integrity in what one of our operatives' reports calls 'the old-fashioned English way.' A strong Watchdog supporter. Works on their paper, the *Argus*. There's nothing subversive against her, and we can be certain she's not involved in anything. Why?"

"Secondly," Vlakhov went on, "I know you told me all about O'Hara's connection with John Custis. I want you to put a couple of men on to Custis. He's basically sound, but they may be able to use him." He paused. "He seemed a trifle overpliable from their point of view today, I thought. I

wonder if it's some girl—wasn't one mentioned in the report?"

"Yes, it didn't strike me much though. One can't link everyone with every girl they meet."

"No, but look into it. People might try to get at the department through me, by using Custis in some way. So keep an eye on him."

"Right, I'll do that."

"Oh, and make sure I get a copy of the next few of Stahlberg's articles in *Selene*. They have their points for the present day. And they are interesting as regards Stahlberg too. Have a skim of them yourself sometime, and put a note on your file that you needn't worry about his attitude, or his pass. But I suppose you feel it's your duty to make sure." Vlakhov smiled at his assistant, and added, "Incidentally I gave Custis the artificial Braque. He'll soon tell me just how good it is—or isn't. The PACIC boys rather hedged."

CHAPTER NINE

When Custis returned to his London flat in the Willett Building (two storeys below the roof garden) and opened the door, the communicator on the hall table spoke softly:

"Messages: 21 hours last night from Mr Stahlberg." Then in Martin's voice, "John, I'll be in London tomorrow. Look you up at about eleven."

Custis waited, but rather to his disappointment no one else had called. He took his case to the bedroom, opened it, and brought out the Braque. Ripping off the plastic padding, he was carrying it over to the east wall of the lounge when the communicator chimed again, "Live call: Miss Jones."

He put the painting down and hurried to the hall. "Hullo, Elvira," he said warmly as he sat down and switched on the stereo.

Her face appeared, golden and convincing.

"Hallo, John. I thought I'd bring Richard O'Hara round for a drink about midday, if that's all right?"

"Fine," Custis answered in a markedly ambivalent voice, "but do you really need a chaperone? A rather old-fashioned one too, I thought."

"Oh, Richard gets a bit pompous when he's had a few drinks, but he's all right really. As a matter of fact, he was rather impressed by your remarks the other day, though you mightn't have guessed it from his manner."

"I didn't. But do bring him if you want to. Martin Stahlberg's looking in this morning too, I hope. Watch out for him.

He likes girls, though perhaps he prefers them more frivolous."

Plainly piqued by this inept remark, Elvira replied shortly, "We'll be glad to meet him. Well, good-bye for now," and rang off.

Custis went back to the lounge. He held the picture up at various points on the wall and finally hung it on one of the many magnetics, removing a small Fitzgerald to make a place for it.

He went back to the bedroom and returned with a handful of tapes. He sat down in the main chair and started to play them over. As the description and analysis of Braque's work went on, picture after picture was reproduced in the stereo. After an hour of absorbed 'reading' Custis felt well set up on the subject. There was no reference to the painting on the wall, but a lot of the painter's work might have got early into private hands and remained there.

As the speaker continued, "Fenwick has described this group as, in a restrained way, the cream of early Cubism . . ." it was interrupted by the entrance circuit with "Mr. Karr is here."

Custis switched off and went to let him in. The fat visitor, another of the many art critics who infested London, lived in a flat lower down. Custis had met him in the entrance hall earlier in the morning.

"I thought I'd like to see the Braque you mentioned," Karr said. "I didn't want to intrude, because I couldn't remember if you knew more about the period than I do. But on looking through your tapes I believe it's more my speciality than yours."

This was true, though not to the extent that Custis would have bothered to ask him up for an opinion.

"There it is," he said, however, in a hospitable fashion, "and you'll need a whisky to gesture with."

"Yes, please," Karr replied, going up to the Braque. He stood back at a chosen distance and appeared to go into a trance. "It seems rather good," he remarked finally. "Oh, thank you. No water. . . ." He took the drink and moved forward to peering distance, his nose an inch off the canvas.

"It's only a thought," he said after a few moments, "but the paint doesn't really look old enough."

Custis got up, interested, and after inspection agreed. "It doesn't matter very much," he added, "though I'll have the labs test it later. It may well be a forgery, or even a copy. If so I'll present it to the Interplanetary Society. All the painting crew this side of the square like authenticity better than decorativeness."

"Well, you must admit that they have reason. After all . . ."

"All right, all right. It's precisely to avoid continued argument on those lines that I'd get rid of it." Custis smiled hastily to take the edge off this remark, and added, "The chap who gave it to me will be pleasantly offended."

Apparently not entirely mollified by this, Karr said, "Well, I must be off. Thanks for showing me the painting; and tell me the result when you inquire."

"You haven't finished your drink."

"No more I have," and the visitor soaked it down and was off at a fast waddle.

As Custis let him out the lift doors opened and there was Stahlberg, brown and smiling.

"Hullo, Martin; It's nice to see you in a decent gravity field." Custis led the way back and pointed to the decanter.

"Hullo, John How was H-H?" asked Stahlberg, pouring himself out a large drink.

"He'll be all right, the doctors think." Custis described his visit to Tycho Hospital, ending, "And, you know, the whole thing made me feel pretty terrible About individual freedom and all that sort of thing, you understand." He looked up a trifle anxiously, but added in a stubborn voice, "One can't just be flippant about things of that sort."

Stahlberg took a last long pull at the drink and said:

"That feels better. . . . I got over from Capri in twelve minutes. The convertor isn't giving pure mono " He looked into his glass for a moment "If they didn't have these techniques, H-H would be dead."

"Yes, of course, that's true. . . . But I wish we could have the advantages without the disadvantages "

"May I answer with a simile from the grand field of sex?" Stahlberg answered expansively. "The great Yeats wrote somewhere:

Take the sour
If you take me.
I can scoff and lour
And scold for an hour
'That's certainly the case,' said he."

"So everything has a bad aspect?" Custis retorted crossly.

"No, just some things." Stahlberg poured another large shot.

"You'd better have a ten-minute soberer," Custis said, "There's rather a nice girl coming. Also Richard O'Hara, the Watchdog." He put a tablet in the glass, to the unenthusiastic compliance of Stahlberg, who merely remarked:

"Quis dogebit ipsos doggos?"

"Uh?"

"Oh, I keep forgetting what a specialist you are. You know, your mention of H-H's earphones and things reminds me of the time I tried to learn everything."

"How do you mean 'everything'," Custis asked.

"Why, pretty nearly just that." Stahlberg was by now going pretty well. The soberer was not due to take over for some minutes yet. "When they got those techniques of teaching facts by tapes played over into your ears when you're unconscious, I got hold of an educator and a room and doped myself unconscious for a fortnight while every tape in the Encyclopaedia was played over a couple of times into one ear or another. But it didn't take, I'm afraid."

Custis told him of Sir Arthur's crack about the quote from Milton.

"Yes, he had me there, the old swine," Stahlberg admitted; "though I never claimed mathematics was a necessity for the cultured chap."

"Did you learn about art in your induced stupor?"

"No. I knew enough for the man about-the-planets, I guess. Why?"

"Oh, look at that painting—or maybe it isn't—on the wall behind you. Lorimer Vlakhov gave it to me," Custis said.

"Even I can see it's a Braque. One of the really easy things to recognize."

"Yes . . . though Karr thinks it may be a forgery."

"Well, what does it matter? I like it, I must say." He got

up and walked over to it. "I can feel this damned soberer taking effect wasn't one pill too much?"

"You can have some more to drink when Elvira and O'Hara come."

"Good. . . . Yes, it's a nice picture. I like the guitar and the scrap of antique newspaper. Do you know—it's an odd coincidence—the letters on the bit you can see of the paper makes part of the word for 'newspaper' in Semanto. You can only just see it."

"Semanto?"

"Surely . . ."

"No, I've never heard of it, and don't bother to tell me how uneducated I am," Custis interrupted.

"Oh, all right. Anyhow, you know about painting You discovered Blakeway, or did he discover you? . . . Semanto is an artificial language the Institute of General Semantics has been working on for years. It's supposed to be far closer in structure to the structure of real events than any other language. I imagine if it's all they claim for it, it'll be the universal tongue in a hundred years or so."

"Oh! All that psycho-semantic business about how the hidden assumptions in languages force people to think nonlogically. But how could the newspaper be in Semanto?"

"Oh, it's just a coincidence There must have been newspapers in dozens of languages in Paris when Braque was working. The letters that are showing happen to form the same word, that's all. Or perhaps it's something rare in French even. I bet you I come across a coincidence a good as that at least every week."

The speaker announced, "Miss Jones and Mr. O'Hara."

Elvira came in with a stiff grace, O'Hara looked remarkably friendly.

"Elvira, this is Martin Stahlberg. Richard O'Hara."

She looked up at Martin's face, which was covered by a smile which moved tentatively towards the frontier between social greeting and intense admiration Her own lips formed a short, but not strict, smile of reply, as she said, more formally than her look, "How do you do?"

As O'Hara hung up his coat he said, "Elvira is too well brought up to speak at once, on meeting a writer, about her views on his work. I think I'm too old to bother about such an

inhibition. So I can say straight out that with all its incompleteness in some respects, I thought *Coherence* really does begin to bring the threads together. It's a brave effort."

This struck Stahlberg as a rather crude attempt to provide the sort of flattering remark that is supposed to be made especially palatable by its originator's attitude of sturdy criticism. Moreover it distracted his attention from Elvira, who now stood in the doorway of the lounge, her hair caught into a sleek golden liquid by light from both sides.

Still, it was polite. And though Stahlberg was not a person to be abashed or respectful at anyone's position or alleged attainments, he could not but feel a certain interest in the key man of such a forthright organization.

As if thinking on the same lines, O'Hara now said, "I can see you are an anti-conformist, who likes to think and decide for himself. We of the Freedom and Vigilance League think of ourselves as an organization of the same character."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Stahlberg replied, finding the idea rather telling, at first sight anyhow. "But I see what you mean, in a way," he qualified, out of friendship to Vlakhov. Thinking that Elvira, whom he had now turned back to, did not look as if she thought this lukewarm agreement was adequate, he went on, "I must say I think you people are pretty well right in theory. It's only in practice that I can't see anything going very wrong at present."

"Theory is able to predict long-term dangers in practice," the mouth beneath those cornflower eyes commented. Stahlberg found it rather convincing even in the direction of its explicit argument.

He led her over to the Braque. Meanwhile O'Hara spoke—chatted would have been the accurate word—with Custis.

When Stahlberg finally got round to being shown the roof-garden by Elvira, Custis was prepared to admit that O'Hara, with all his irritating manner, was a notable person—over-positive and brash, indeed, but perhaps no more than in Hayakawa's fashion. Not that Custis' vague sympathy towards the Watchdogs was to be increased by such considerations. In fact he was one of those people who prefer, if anything, a creed in which they feel that they have to make allowances for unworthy adherents. But it was still pleasant to find Richard O'Hara without that overpowering, and indeed

almost bullying, impression he had given on the roof-garden. Even if, as Custis was quite shrewd enough to suspect, he was putting himself out to be pleasant, that showed remarkable sensibility at, and regret for, his previous behaviour.

He showed O'Hara the painting, with the remark that Lorimer Vlakhov's gift proved him not to be the soulless automation the Watchdogs supposed.

O'Hara showed little interest.

On the roof Stahlberg had confirmed his first impression that Elvira was, to him, a mildly exciting girl.

The day was one of those flawless ones of late autumn, when everything is still, and a very light haze hangs softly in the valleys. The hills of old North London rose above it into clear air, and, higher, to the south, the Downs showed a pale autumn green. It was November. The air outside had a slight damp bite to it, but the heaters were on in the roof-garden, and it was in a calm comfort that Elvira and Stahlberg leant over a brick-topped wall, under a small umbrella pine.

He had already established his right to a further meeting.

Without exactly abandoning any of his arguments about the ability of the Government to muddle through, the real danger of the Bases, and the necessity for enough psychological control to prevent race suicide, he had somehow got himself into the position of the careless cynic whom a fine woman can save.

But this was not a pose exactly; it was more a very slight disguise for a less crude, but somewhat similar feeling. He would do a lot, short of sacrificing his views (which, moreover, were certainly prepared to be critical of the administration in concrete detail), for this girl.

As not seldom before, the feeling that he had found an entirely new and superior type of brilliant feminity, came over him. As usual, it was with the suddenness and certainty of a religious conviction Superficially Elvira seemed, at first impression, duller and less vivid than, say, Mireille. But the calm intensity of his feelings on 'important' matters could not but go with a similar intensity in her relations with a man like Stahlberg a more important matter still, in his opinion, and the crown and completion of any other sides of Elvira's life . . . he hoped.

After a bit he was saying, "Character? Oh, you mean the building up of a coherent personality by a lot of detailed actions and so on. A nice parlour game, but I never could see why people should have thought it a high art. And what does it amount to, anyhow? There are people one has known all one's life and one doesn't bother to have a clear idea of their motives and moods. Yet that doesn't make them less interesting."

"So you think that characterization ruins fiction?"

"Not at all," Stahlberg replied. "It's a method like any other, so long as one doesn't idolize it. And if it comes to character, I agree with the poet—*And passion would bring character enough.*"

There was a curious, pregnant pause—too long to need explaining. He found that they were looking strongly into each others' eyes, and feeling it best, at this stage, to relax the conversation, he said, "Old Lorimer Vlakhov is still a good fellow I'm going up to see him in a day or two I must remember to get the pass John has brought for me. We all fought together in the war, you know, and if I was young enough I might follow him again if he asked for volunteers for a campaign in the Asteroids."

She frowned. "Oh, the Bases; I'm sure they'd only be too glad to live and let live. They probably attack us because Vlakhov's Patrol attacks them all the time."

"Why, I don't believe they've found a Base for over a year. There are very seldom any offensive operations."

"But they're always searching for them, and the Bases know that those are offensive operations too, though not successful ones." She paused, and added, "If we let them alone they'd probably mature gradually into a perfectly reasonable attitude."

"I doubt that." Stahlberg very much more than doubted it, but not wishing to go further into this troublesome issue, he said, "Don't be too hard on Vlakhov. He's a human."

"Richard saw him the other day, and said he was most unforthcoming about absolutely everything."

"Well, anyhow, he gave John Custis a nice picture yesterday even if it is partly a phoney." He explained about the Braque, mentioning the Semanto word for good measure.

". . . Which proves, I imagine, that if it's a phoney it's not a

recent one; or at least that the forger wasn't seriously concerned with fooling his client. But it's probably some other language. Even Semanto has several words based on various old dialects."

Elvira looked at the clock on the Interplanetary Tower and said, "Oh, we must go."

"And I'll call you . . . Elvira, when can I do that?"

He looked hard into her eyes, as if getting a firm grip on something, and added, "Soon, of course." His smile, though still on, had been taken in a couple of points.

"Next week." She smiled more warmly than he for the first time. "If I don't call *you* earlier."

* * *

After Elvira and O'Hara had gone, Custis said:

"Did you rush her?"

"Why, is she yours?" Stahlberg was genuinely concerned. In fact the only poaching he had ever done was when he had lifted a liberated peach off Custis years ago in Alma Ata.

"No—though I think she's rather nice," the painter answered. "But it always takes me a long time to get seriously interested, as you know; and I'm still not entirely finished with Brenda. She's really more my line anyhow, as she's a painter."

"No, I never can see that," Stahlberg answered in an interested tone. "But I always find other people's ideas in the matter extraordinary. Did you notice anything between Vlakhov and his secretary incidentally?"

"No, do you know of anything?"

"No, I don't know. But my rather hit-or-miss instinct led me to believe there was an affair last time I saw them. Also I think Lorimer is rather a utilitarian and would like things handy."

"Well, your outlook is certainly illuminating to a less volatile person like me," Custis smiled.

"Oh, I quite realize I'm the manic to your depressive . . ." Stahlberg started, but Custis interrupted him with:

"Don't waste your coruscating epigrams on me. Anyhow, we must go out to lunch. I've nothing in the place."

* * *

Custis came back rather late in the evening, having finally left Stahlberg in a dive with a couple of friendly Patrol Officers on leave and some alleged Bohemian woman something Custis didn't like much. Nor did Stahlberg, except as an occasional change; it was among the things that attracted him from time to time to the little capital, and also one of the things which kept him from coming more often.

When the door opened Custis' speaker gave him a message: to call Elvira urgently But he first went and took a soberer, having improvidently omitted to take any with him. (Stahlberg, who might have been expected to carry them as a matter of course, could not be brought to speak of the drug.)

After a while Custis felt more up to the conversation. Some of the earlier eager interest, and finally all of it, got going again in his mind. He put the call through.

"Hullo, Elvira."

"Hullo, John. I'm sorry to ask you to call so late, but we've discovered rather an awful thing. Are you sitting down? This may take a little time."

"No, but I will."

"Well," she went on, "you know your Braque?"

"The picture Vlakhov gave me? Yes, I know it may be a forgery, if that's what's worrying you."

"No, it isn't that. Martin Stahlberg told me that it had a Semanto word in it And you told Richard that it was probably a forgery. And you got it from Vlakhov. Richard has checked that the combination of letters on the newspaper probably occurs in no known language, certainly not in any that was likely to be printed in a Latin script in a newspaper in Braque's time, except in a few almost impossible combinations. It probably is really a Semanto word!

"Now, obviously no forger would make a mistake like that," she concluded.

"I'm with you, so far. I suppose it could be a sort of joke."

"But it links up with another thing that has been strongly rumoured for some time; that Vlakhov's organization is developing a psychological computer that can perform aesthetic creations."

"Good heavens. Do you really imagine . . ."

"Technicians say it's not theoretically impossible. But why I rang you is this. Do you agree that it's a terribly dangerous thing?"

"Well," he answered, very shaken, "It's one we should have out with Vlakhov anyhow. What's the idea of secrecy in such a case? If you're really sure about it I do feel that we should demand some sort of explanation Such a device, if it's to be developed at all indeed, should be done in the light of day, under the eyes of the creative community—and of the psychologists too." He panted from this vehement and unaccustomed oratory.

"All we want to do now is to go up and see Vlakhov, as you suggest. We can go into the detail of our detective work on the Semanto part tomorrow Will you meet me in the Language Section of the Europe Library? They put their sound group tapes through a punch-card selector or whatever they call it But we can do it again to make sure. You'd better bring a blown-up snap of that part of your picture "

"I'll be very glad to help. I must say that I trust Vlakhov usually, but all this secrecy and politics does seem to have gone to his head " Custis paused. But Elvira cut in before he could continue:

"The thing is, it takes weeks to arrange an interview. And we must do it soon. The machine is obviously complete, or very nearly so, and it might be sprung on the world as a surprise, or with a big propaganda build up, any time now What I thought is that you might take us with you informally. You've got a pass to Aristillus, I think you said?"

"Yes," Custis replied, "I don't see why not. I believe it isn't technically correct, but he can easily hide all his more genuine secrets before we get in. And he can't actually throw us out once we've landed by the crater . . . Well, I suppose he can, but that's a risk worth taking in a good cause."

"Thank you so very much." Elvira's voice was calm and strong "I'll see you in the Library then, at ten Good night."

Custis went to bed in a mental turmoil, regretting that he had taken the soberer.

CHAPTER TEN

In what must, in earlier times, have been the subways and sewers of radio-dusted Hamburg, a small but comfortable conference room had been set up. It was covered, in all directions, by a carefully laid out network of detective and protective devices.

Outside the door were posted guards, with blasters in their service belts, a curious sight to the rank and file members of the technical staff and so on who had probably not actually seen a weapon for twenty years. Elvira looked at them with a rather obvious nerving of herself to accept their implications.

The bench was hard, and the surroundings gloomy. While the operations rooms had been cut into the earth and built properly from plastocrete, it had not been thought necessary to touch the tunnels, and they ran off in three directions, damp and full of muffled echoes, with their ceilings green with some dank subterranean growth. Faint glow-signs marked the doors 'Conference Room', 'Map Room', 'Operations Room' and 'Security Room'—where presumably they were watching the detectors.

The guards, hard bitten-looking young men, stood motionless, and did not answer when Elvira said, "Not very gay, is it?" She sat for a little longer, then walked firmly over and went into the Map Room. No one attempted to stop her.

In the Conference Room, nine men sat around the table. The Liberation Council, the highest organ of the hidden group

within the Watchdogs, was in session, with O'Hara in the chair. He said, in a hard, firm voice:

"It is not often that we can assemble Today, however, we have many tasks The Executive Bureau, the three of us appointed at the last meeting (at which many of you were not present), has had to take some urgent decisions. You may feel that these are being sprung on you at short notice. But we can assure you that it was absolutely essential to keep our plans in complete secrecy until the last moment In brief, we now have prepared, for immediate execution, plans for a final decisive action against the Government."

He looked impressively round the company and added,

"If you do not approve then you may exercise your right to reject them I should say, however, that we are prepared to go forward on our own, without the assistance of recalcitrant groups in the Organization, if necessary Nor can we allow you to return until the attempt is over, one way or another."

There was an uneasy stir, but no one commented

"However, I don't suppose any of you, militant freedom-lovers, will not want to join in this great chance that presents itself." O'Hara went on, "All those assembled here both yourselves and the others outside are capable of playing useful parts in the final organizing and putting into effect of the action contemplated And now, let me introduce and welcome Colonel-General Kurov, representative of the Bases."

The grim, broad figure seated on O'Hara's right and dressed incongruously in grey loungers, nodded to the company.

"It has not been possible to make General Kurov's presence known to most of you before, though most of you knew that we had established contact with the Bases It was extremely difficult to make this contact, and to persuade the Bases of our goodwill and our strength. General Kurov's fact-finding mission has, however, now made it clear to the authorities at Main Base that there is a reasonable chance of success in joint operations against the Government. We, in our turn, must rely on the Bases for a striking force.

"I should emphasize that we are not in complete agreement with the Bases about long-term political aims But it has been possible to draft a very hopeful joint programme which will, I am sure, lead in the long run to the complete re-establishment of liberty.

"Before calling on General Kurov—only for a few words I fear, as we have very urgent matters to discuss—I should say that he is a candidate member of the Presidium of the Free Territories, and was previously a lecturer in the Marx-Yaytsev Institute on General Reserve Base. . . . General Kurov."

The powerful-looking character got to his feet and said, "I only wish to say that my government is in complete agreement with the aims of your democratic liberation movement. We have no desire to introduce our own system on Earth, but are prepared to co-operate in a broad democratic regime, after dangerous elements have been eliminated. You will hear the details of our part in the joint plan shortly. And you will see that our contribution may be decisive. We have time, if you wish, for a few questions."

O'Hara said, "Yes, I suppose we have."

A younger man, flaxen-haired and heavy-jawed, rose. "I'm Hendricks of our Technical Intelligence Section. It's a great pleasure to all of us to meet you, General. We've had to rely on Government reporting—that is to say on hostile propaganda—for all our information about the Bases. I, for one, hope the chairman will give you time to go briefly into two points. The first is, what is the political system of the Bases? And the second is the plan or theory behind the raids you make. Perhaps you could also tell us something about the use of psychological compulsion in the Bases—the Government always alleged the worst against you."

Kurov replied in a brusque manner:

"We have a few minutes. I can only say our system is democratic—free elections by adult suffrage. Democratic centralism also implies strict discipline under the elected leadership. Our Constitution is based on the principles of Marx, Lenin and Yaytsev. We aim at a free society without classes or state. But for the present the survival of our oases of democracy means that everything has to be subordinated to the struggle. The raids are reprisals for your Government's attempts to destroy us, and are defensive in principle. Psychological compulsion is used to prevent security leaks, which could result in the location and destruction of our entire people." He bowed stiffly and sat down.

"How many of you are there?" Hendricks asked.

But O'Hara interrupted. "That is naturally a secret matter which need not concern us. The important point is that the Bases can provide an adequate striking force of men and ships in the right place, at the key moment." He took up the paper in front of him and went on, "We are met at the crisis of our Organization's history. For the last month we have been concentrating for a decisive blow. Our chances of success are now at their highest. Briefly, we have two alternative plans; one offensive and one to cover failure.

"We have known for some time that the Government, in its security area in the Mare Imbrium, has been preparing a psychological computer capable of operating on a mass basis and deep into the personality We have now learnt that the machine is complete. It has already been used to produce an effective painting—proof enough that it can affect people at the depths usually only reached by art. Indeed it seems likely that if we tried to cause the fall of the Government by giving publicity to the machine, they would maintain that it was merely a harmless aesthetic device.

"Our plan is different. We propose to seize the machine, which is in Thaetetus. An hour or less, our psycho-technicians advise us, will be sufficient to adapt it for our purpose, if it is not in fit condition already The main public stereo-stations will be wrecked on a given signal, and the machine will be linked in to a powerful stereocaster in all bands and languages.

"This will be a propaganda operation verging on the hypnotic.

"At the same time large quantities of hypnin will be released into the atmosphere above all the main population areas, and, where possible, into the airducts of colonial settlements. In the confusion it will cover the seizure of power.

"We do not anticipate serious opposition. The coup will be carried out under our watchword of freedom from compulsion. We shall have to resort to psycho compulsion temporarily, of course, and the population will be fully conditioned in detail to accept the new regime in the weeks after our victory."

An older man, bespectacled like O'Hara, interrupted. "But, Richard, surely we've always been agreed that when the choice was properly presented to the people no compulsion would be needed?"

Kurov said with a hard smile. "Men have to be conditioned to liberty. You're Mason, I take it?"

"Are you conditioned yourself, General?" the older man asked.

"From earliest youth. So are you, but more haphazardly."

"But that's just the Government argument," Mason cried, turning right and left to address all those present. "Gentlemen, I appeal to you. I recognize the temporary psychological knockout of the immediate operational plan. But must we use compulsion any more after that?"

"What's the difference?" Hendricks shouted. "This is war—we can't flinch now. Weaknesses like Mason's might well betray us. Then we'd have creeping tyranny for ever instead of our brief dictatorship!"

"Remember full freedom will be restored in a matter of years," said a milder voice.

But Kurov had risen. "Betray us?" he roared. "That is just what Mason is doing. I've been certain there was a Government agent in the Council. Now, at the crisis he tries to sabotage us. Guards!"

Two of the unsmiling young men who had accompanied him came in from the corridor as quickly as if they had been waiting for this moment.

"Take this traitor out and shoot him!"

An uneasy murmur went round the table. But as the men stamped out, with a white-faced Mason, his glasses hooked over only one ear, frogmarched between them, O'Hara said, "We have a considerable amount of evidence against Mason which will be submitted to our next meeting."

A minute later there was a dull, echoing thud from somewhere along the subway. It was followed by another. There was silence for a moment. Then someone asked, rather shakily, "Could he have given away the place of the meeting?"

"No," O'Hara said, "I brought him here myself without giving him notice. He wasn't carrying a tracer." He went on more formally, "And I hope that objections to compulsion are not too deeply rooted, as we shall want everyone here to take a compulsive to prevent any discussion of our plans except where necessary to their success."

There was a silence. The man who had asked the question rose, went to the door and shut it, and returned to his seat,

moving as slowly and deliberately as if his time and kinaesthetic senses were affected by a week's course of inhaling the gravity-adaptor drug, gravinol.

O'Hara, his eyes glittering coldly behind the thick lenses, was saying, "Our alternative plan, in case of failure, is this. As you know, the photon-drive has been developed, but remains secret. But the plans are now in our hands For some weeks construction of hulls or in some cases conversion of entire asteroids has been going on in the Bases. All that is necessary is the installation of the drive element. Work on these has also begun, and Hendricks tells us that it is a fairly simple task. Once programmed, the drives should be ready in a week.

"If our coup fails we will inflict what damage we can and embark, with the personnel of the Bases and as many of ourselves as we can get away, for one of the nearer stars. When we find a decent planetary system we can expand far more effectively than is open to the Bases, driven to live secretly in excavations in tiny planetoids. After a few decades we should be in a position to carry the offensive back to the Solar System."

Hendricks rose and said, "I move we accept these masterly plans forthwith and proceed immediately with the attempt to seize power."

Kurov said more cautiously, "The plans are as good as we are likely to get. But as a man who has carried out real operations, I know the difficulties How do you propose to seize the psycho-compeller? That seems to be the key to the whole business."

O'Hara looked pleased and said, "I have found a man who will take a few of us into the security zone on the pretext of a protest to the sinister Vlakhov. He has a pass which will get a small ship past the outer barrier. We should be able to have a dozen or so men with small arms equipment in the back. Once inside the barrier we'll blast straight for Thaetetus, where the machine is, instead of Aristillus At the same time a sympathizer of ours in Aristillus will cut off Vlakhov's headquarters with a freezer. Other steps are being taken to neutralize the Patrol Base—though that is more problematic. . . . We will have control, in any case, of Vlakhov's communication machinery."

"That is excellent." Kurov stated shortly; "I think that it would be best if Headquarters went to Thaetetus with this expedition. If there's trouble Rear Headquarters, remaining here, can take over control. O'Hara and I and Hendricks will go to the Moon.

"Meanwhile there is a great deal of staff work to do. My assistants, though they may appear silent executors of the people's judgment, are trained staff officers and sons of officers. I suggest you transform your three rather vague committees into three operations staffs—I have a proposed allocation of duties already prepared. One staff will handle the main coup, one liaison with our fleet, and one subsidiary sabotage and other actions."

There was a murmur of assent. O'Hara nodded and rose, and the group dispersed.

He strolled with one of the others to the Operations Room. Elvira was waiting there.

"What was the shooting?" she asked quickly.

"Mason was executed as a spy."

Her hands made a involuntary gesture towards her face. "Executed?" Then, more calmly, "How terrible. Do you think the Government knows about our plans?"

"They must know something, I suppose, but almost certainly nothing essential." O'Hara said calmly

"Oh, Richard. . . . I don't worry what they'd do to us if they caught us. It's just that failure now would be so awful. I mean *total* failure."

"They'd probably just reconstruct you psychologically. It's not a bad risk."

"How can you say that?" She looked up at him tightly. "It's the most awful thing that ever could happen. Worse than murder, putting one's personality to death."

"Well, even murder is justified in a good cause, I suppose." His good mood was not in the least shaken by her worries.

"Yes, but they'd kill our personalities in a bad cause. . . . I was one of the last to avoid the new education. My parents were in the original colony at Lowell and there weren't enough children there for a school when I was a girl. You've no idea how I value that. . . . I wish I could see the Mare Erythraeum again before the battle starts."

"You can see it afterwards. Don't worry so, my dear. This is your great moment. You'll be a historical heroine!"

"Oh, I'm sure you're right, Richard. . . . I'll be all right in a second. . . . Look at the ops map—isn't it exciting?"

On the main wall one screen showed the two hemispheres of the Earth, dotted with a hundred or so green lights. Another showed the two sides of the Moon: half-a-dozen lights shone, including ones on the sites of Aristillus and Thaetetus. A third screen, giving a much smaller scale the surfaces of Venus, Mars, Ceres, Callisto and Io, showed at present only two lights both on Mars.

One of the side walls held a screen giving a view of the Solar System, from Jupiter in, from above. On it were indicated the locations, as far as known, of the Patrol's fleet. The main concentrations appeared to be in the Asteroids and on Mars.

"The Bases won't give us the location, or the size, of their fleet. But Kurov says it is quite adequate to hold, and perhaps destroy, the forces based on the Moon and the Earth. So it must be fairly strong. They certainly have better weapons than the Patrol would guess—we passed them some ourselves."

Elvira looked back into the corridor, where Kurov was addressing his assistants in some language she did not know. She said in rather an uneasy voice, "How do you think we'll get on with the Bases, when we've won?"

"They're hard bargainers," O'Hara admitted, adding after a moment, "But they swear they won't impose their own system here unless we want it. They want a certain amount of territory, of course. But they'll welcome delegations to go and see how their system works. We really know very little about it, it's true. All their Communist jargon is just an historical accident. They show signs of having got back to a sort of primitive Marxist simplicity—and there's a lot to be said for that."

Behind them in the corridor Kurov was shouting, "Captain Siktirenko!"

Elvira said, "I thought that Yaytsev's teaching was quite opposed to Lenin's and Marx's."

"Well . . ." O'Hara looked round and went on in a subdued

tone, "Such is not uncommon view some people even say that Marx and Lenin are incompatible."

"I know."

He looked at her a trifle quizzically, and said, "You read your friend Stahlberg's article in the last number of *New Polemic?*"

She blushed. "And elsewhere too. You seem to think I'm illiterate."

"Anyhow," he continued in the same conspiratorial tone as before, "the Bases don't like speculations of that sort—though as a matter of fact their practice isn't even strictly Yaytsevist in my view—the little they tell of it, that is. But remember, their doctrine, however contradictory, is *called* Marxism-Leninism-Yaytsevism, and they like to hear it by that name. There's quite a lot in it as a matter of fact. I'm afraid we don't study unpopular doctrines with sufficient care—after the victory we must give more space to their contribution to political and philosophical theory."

His voice had somehow taken on the tones of the lecturer; almost of old Sevillano himself. Indeed she saw with sudden clarity that in a way O'Hara was only a toughened and more unscrupulous version of Sevillano after all, and equally capable of the self-deception of the barren intellectual. For it was simply not true that Marxism was not studied. If it wasn't given more scope it was just that it was so palpably refutable by elementary high-school semantics—open mind or no open mind.

She began to feel that the leaders had their limitations, that her role would not be only to serve. She had her own contribution perhaps. If anything came of the coup, that is to say.

O'Hara took off his glasses and clipped the lenses into a new holder. "As a matter of fact," he continued, "I think that people like you and me, who don't like drab ordinariness, would manage all right even if a completely Bases régime was established here, and I mean even assuming that Government propaganda is more or less right and there is a lot of what you'd call injustice. Injustice is better than death by stagnation."

"The Government claims that injustice *causes* death by stagnation."

"Well, the Bases have survived, haven't they?" He turned to pick up his case. "Did you make the rendezvous with Custis?"

"Yes," she answered abstractedly, "I got on to him by relay about an hour ago, and came straight on here. He's to meet us in Geneva in five hours' time He's quite happy to go in your ship, so there shouldn't be any difficulty about concealment."

"Good. You and I and Kurov and Hendricks and the pilot can go in the forward compartment. We'll seal off the rest, and the weapons, in the spare fuel section to the rear. And now let's be going."

Elvira cast one look back at the delineations of the worlds which she was going to help to rule. She made allowances for O'Hara's cynical remarks: all men are inclined to take that line with a woman idealist. She promised herself that she would do all one woman could to see that no further injustice took the place of the Government's dangerous grip. She was beginning to understand that she might have to be ruthless then, as well as now.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

In London Custis was brooding over the situation. He had promised Elvira that he wouldn't call Vlakhov to tell him about the visit. Even the fact that he was going to the Moon himself was not to be mentioned, let alone that he was taking others with him.

He was wondering whether he was acting rightly. It was quite true that this machine appeared to be a menace. At best it was a revolting intrusion of mechanical devices into a field which had no need of them. The old dichotomy between 'Art' and 'Science' might long since have been abandoned, but this seemed to be an attempt to impose a technical marvel on the independent realm where men explored and integrated the human consciousness.

It was true that he might well forfeit Vlakhov's friendship. But then wasn't Vlakhov forfeiting his by this sort of action? If it was all a misunderstanding, so much the better.

The evidence Elvira had shown him was convincing. And particularly it impressed him with the good sense of the Watchdogs. He had had the impression that they were the sort to go off half-cocked on all occasions. Instead of which as much evidence as possible was obtained, and even then the mission to Vlakhov could only be called an exploratory one, to confirm, or not, whether their fears were justified.

Apart from which, a promise is a promise.

Still, even allowing himself a bias in favour of Vlakhov, he could not attribute bad motives to him. The vague hints

that Vlakhov might misuse the machine for power reasons was nonsense But the sort of mechanical positivism he preached went rather plausibly with a well-meaning, but intolerable device like an art machine, pure and simple.

He had not taken the 'Braque' down; but he tried not to look at it. He had thought for a moment that it might be a complete mechanical reproduction of some unknown work of that Master. But the Semanto wording excluded that a copying machine copies.

It might indeed be a complicated joke. But only Stahlberg and his sort would bother with such nonsense, and he wasn't involved.

Custis turned away and concentrated on his Blakeway. The pale reds and yellows formed a series of interlocking planes stretching away calmly under a sky turning almost black at the zenith and a rich blue on the horizon. In the top right-hand corner, a little disc of vivid white—Phobos apparently broke the darkness. In the foreground a few dark green specks, giant Martian 'sprouts' probably, broke the bare orange.

He wished he were on that calm little planet not in one of the bigger settlements, which were less calm and more crowded than Earth but in some research outpost, where he could go out in his helmet, into an almost motionless, almost soundless world. Perhaps not in the great deserts, as depicted here, but in one of the fertile areas—the Margaritifer Sinus for example.

He would devote himself to solving the artefacts problem, and not have any political troubles.

But it was getting on for time to go. Custis did not like spending his trips flattened back into a relaxer at three or four 'g', like Stahlberg One can get to Geneva in comfort at a steady 'g' and a half in ten minutes or so, without all that hurrying.

When he got to the London landing ground, the speaker at the entrance gate said, "Mr. Custis, your motor is out of commission."

"What do you mean? I came in late last night and checked it."

"Convertors worn. At routine check it gave out tungsten, and that's jammed the valves."

"I don't understand it But can't a replacement be put in?"

Ranchevski came into the entrance hall and walked over to the check point as the speaker was telling Custis, "You need a lot of replacements It'll take four hours." He called out:

"Ranchevski!"

The other turned and smiled. "Good afternoon, Custis!"

"My blasted engine's gone . . ." Custis explained.

"Yes," said Ranchevski, "they do that sometimes I don't know why there can't be some automatic retuner attached. But it shouldn't take long to replace?"

"Four hours. But I'm in a hurry."

"Oh, I expect someone will give you a lift I will myself if you don't want to go far. I'm hopping to Rome, if that's any use."

"I'm only going to Geneva," the artist answered hopefully.

"Come along then; I'm not in any hurry and I'll be glad to put you down."

"Oh, thank you very much" Custis exhaled a long sigh of relief. "And I'm glad you're not in a hurry. . . . What acceleration do you use?"

"Two to two and a half 'g' . . . and I've got a good relaxer."

This wasn't as bad as Custis was accustomed to from his friends, and he went across the asphalt to the little rocket, pleased that things were going right for him.

The rocket was a small one, though squat and powerful-looking, so they didn't bother with a gantry, but climbed a ladder to the entrance port As they scrambled into the cramped control cabin Custis said, "Can you go far in this little boat?"

"Oh, yes I've done a lot of tinkering, and the latest extras are in her engine. I can get to the Moon without refuelling, though I normally use her for trips on Earth."

"A friend of mine, Martin Stahlberg, has a larger one, and he can hardly get down from the space-station needs extra fuel compartments."

"Yes, I know Stahlberg –he's a very good racer But his boat isn't equipped for distance. And he has a rather luxurious cabin, too."

"Oh yes, I forgot you were a real jet jockey," Custis answered "Martin is a bit of an amateur."

Ranchevski, after getting cleared, took off on manual with-

out getting a course, into an open sky. "You can see where you're going for twenty kilometres on a day like this," he said, "and I know the take-off angle for most places in Europe as close as I'll ever need them."

The muffled roar of the jet under their feet penetrated the unsoundproofed cabin. A cirrus layer went quickly past the portholes. The weight pressing Custis into the relaxer seemed greater than two 'g', he thought.

"What was Russia like?", he asked vaguely.

Ranchevski gave him a quizzical look, and said, "It varied. Pretty bad towards the end. . . . You can't really catch the meaning of no political liberty till you've been through it. Yaytsev was quite something." He held down hard on the manual while Custis, more livelily but with a certain stuffy disapproval brought on by the thought of Ranchevski's conditioning, went on.

"Still, it was just bad luck, really, that all that comparative liberalism of Russia in the sixties was swept away in the Yaytsev reaction which followed."

"Well, yes, it was a very near thing—Yaytsev's coming to power was a very near thing, and in that sense you're absolutely right. Just the same, the reaction was only possible because Khrushchev and Co. hadn't changed to the slightest degree the system which left political decisions in the hands of the hundred-odd hardened old Central Committee operators."

The hiss of air around them died away to nothing. And then there was silence, and Custis fell forward with a jerk into his harness. After a minute Ranchevski said, "The power control circuit has cut out."

"What do you mean?"

"I can get a minute out of the reserves to put us into an orbit We're up to circular velocity already. We can't get down."

"Oh God," Custis cried. "Can't you signal distress? An aid-boat would be on to us in half-an-hour, and it will land us at Geneva too—they don't mind where they set you down."

"I'm sorry, the communicators are out too (they use the same powerpack), except for a sealed-in set which is only giving out our call sign. That will never attract an aid-boat—yachts

orbit for hours, just to watch the view. We're at five-fifty kilometres."

Cut off from his mission by no fault of his own, Custis began to feel relieved. But Ranchevski went on, "And now that you have the position clear and realize that there's nothing you can do to change it, I'd better say that I'm an agent of the Special Office. Director Vlakhov has sent you a message," and he flipped the switch of a recorder.

Custis was, for a moment, literally struck dumb with this confirmation of his most extreme suspicions, and before he could protest, Vlakhov's voice came from the recorder:

"I'm sorry about this, John. It's a question of urgent danger. We're getting you out of the way to save you trouble. I'll send a craft to pick you up in a few hours, and you can come and see that I'm telling the truth. Busy now. . . . Out."

Custis looked up, a feeling of rage creeping slowly up him till he felt that his face must be a bright purple. Ranchevski said:

"That's how it is. You'll be quite satisfied in an hour or two. Meanwhile, do you play picquet? I meant to ask the office to tell me, but they sounded so busy I didn't like to."

"Play picquet?" Custis finally exploded. He started to undo his harness, almost prepared to attack the man physically. But it is difficult to fight in free fall, and Ranchevski looked quite prepared to take care of himself. Moreover, he would be unable to use the craft, or even communicate, if he did manage to stun the other—if Ranchevski's story about the boat's condition was correct, and it was just the sort of logical action Vlakhov would think of.

These considerations cooled him down a little. "I don't like these methods you brought in with you from the M.V.D."

"Oh, come, Mr. Custis. It's *your* friends who have called in the M.V.D.—to use the name it had under Fouché!"

"*My* friends?"

"Yes, your O'Hara's lot—they're in contact with the Bases."

Custis answered, "That's a point I'd prefer to check for myself when Vlakhov offers me his so-called proofs. It sounds a typical slander already rather outworn in Government propaganda circles."

"All right," the agent said, "but you'll find I'm telling the truth."

"I can't say that I care if it *is* true," Custis went on. "If the Government is capable of the villainy it appears to be perpetrating, then probably it has misrepresented the Bases. I don't mean only this . . . this kidnapping of a citizen on his lawful occasions, but also the development of a . . ."

". . . machine of psycho-compelling everybody," Ranchevski concluded for him in a high-pitched voice "I hope that sounded like your pal Elvira."

"So you boast about your blasted eavesdroppings!" The slow smoulder having reached the powder barrel simultaneously with this provocative remark, Custis finally lost his temper. He sprang up from the couch and attempted a left hook at Ranchevski. This ill-judged effort left him floating in the air of the cabin, threshing wildly and ineffectively.

"I'm sorry, Mr Custis," Ranchevski remarked, reaching for a wall panel and taking out a bulb of coffee. "I was specially told to be polite and not provoke you. But I'm damned irritated myself. There's going to be hell's own trouble because of your —well, I suppose I should restrain myself and say, lack of judgment."

Custis breathed heavily but said nothing. He was gradually drifting towards the forward wall. As he reached it Ranchevski tossed him a bulb of coffee too. He took it, and in a dignified silence pulled himself back to the couch and strapped himself in.

Ranchevski went on, "The machine is not a psycho-compeller —though O'Hara thinks of it as such, I imagine."

Custis said coldly, "I never thought it was until now, when I'm by no means convinced of Vlakhov's *bona fides*. But there is a machine, you admit. I take it that it produces paintings?"

"Yes." The other squeezed the last drop from his bulb and stuffed it into a jettison pocket. "And poems too, and music. They haven't completed the sculpture section, which seems surprising you'd think it was easier to . . ."

"It creates works of art!" Custis interrupted. "But can't you see that's a damnable and dangerous thing?"

"Why—you don't think it can rival good art—or do you?"

"No. I think that fools will say it has and dumb scientific theorists 'prove' it, so that real art will be driven out. . . . But the whole thing is unpalatable for dozens of other reasons."

"Well, I can't say that the art side worries me terribly. But do you think that the truth, whatever it happens to be, should not be sought?"

This inquiry rather shook Custis, who thought for a moment and said, "I don't really know enough about the project anyhow; though it's difficult to see how the artistic world can approve it."

"Here are some tapes on it. . . ." Ranchevski threw them across. "But what should worry you is your friends' lunatic plans. If they came off you'd be digging for liberty in the salt mines, or getting asteroids nice and hollow for the high-muck-a-muck Commissars."

"Your mere assertion is not likely to convince me," Custis reminded him coldly. "but perhaps these files will be informative in the weary hours in front of me. I don't play picquet."

CHAPTER TWELVE

On the island where the great cold lake narrows down to become the Rhône once more, O'Hara's party had their converted pleasure yacht waiting for take-off. 'Converted' is not perhaps the right word, for the conversion only amounted to preparing improvised compartments in the long-range fuel section to hold one of Kurov's officers and ten assorted plotters, with a balanced collection of small arms and exploders. Kurov, horrified by the incompetent staff-work, had gone over the plan of attack on a model till he was now able to express himself as reasonably satisfied.

A cold wind came off the greyly glittering surface of the water, and the junior conspirators huddled in the lee of a couple of hastily constructed plastoid huts which served as temporary operation rooms.

As soon as Custis became overdue, O'Hara sent Elvira Jones to give him a call. His flat reported him out, but offered to take a message. The airport could only say that he had called, but that his craft was out of action.

"I expect he's trying to get here by some other means," O'Hara said. "Our psychologists report him as obsessively punctual and punctilious in carrying out his promises. But we were naturally not able to give him any reason to think that arrival on time was absolutely vital."

Kurov said, "The general looseness of arrangements on this planet is a bad augury for any decent reconstruction. What you call obsessive punctuality seems to me to mean simply common

reliability. That is one of the virtues we will need to put over compulsively when the time comes."

O'Hara retorted tensely, "It isn't as bad as all that. We can afford another hour or two. And accidents can cause hitches in the most careful plans. I'm damned sure the Bases didn't intend to lose two ships on Deimos!"

"You'd be shot for a remark like that on the Bases!" Kurov shouted. They glared at each other, the glitter of rage in the eyes of the little bespectacled intellectual matching that of the broad hulk of a soldier. It was the latter who returned most quickly to good sense, saying: "Well, we must make the best of it. I'm much against postponing the operation unless we absolutely have to. It would be too late for us if the Government could put over a mass compulsion with that machine—which they might do any day, as far as I can see, now that it's ready." He paused, as if about to add something, but did not do so.

Elvira, however, surprisingly put in, in a tart voice, "And your own reputation in the Bases is very much bound up with success now, isn't it? I shouldn't think they'd like to be told that their fleet would have to be withdrawn without an attempt, after all this preparation!"

But Kurov was not annoyed. He smiled and said, "Quite right, Miss Jones. I hadn't realized how much sense even you people, who've been open to corruption by your obsolete civilization, can still manage to preserve! At the very least I might be held accountable for the losses on the Deimos diversion." He glanced round at O'Hara and added, "Even if it was a calculated risk."

O'Hara walked up and down for a few minutes, his head bent forward in thought, and finally said, "Although Custis will probably turn up fairly soon, I think we should now carry out an alternative plan I've had in reserve."

"Oh, Richard!" Elvira cried, in relief, tears coming to her eyes. Both men looked at her with dubious expressions. She was trembling. But under their gaze she pulled herself together into her tense but efficient normal attitude.

O'Hara went on, "You'll do most of the work again, my dear. What I plan is this. Martin Stahlberg has a pass too. He is, Curtis told me, on Capri. You will call him, make a rendezvous there, tell him the same as you told Custis, and bring him

back. Frankly," he added, "I expect that your personal persuasion will count more this time than the logical and civil arguments you used with Custis."

"I'm sure Martin Stahlberg is sound at heart," she replied. "When he understands how much it means to all of us, he'll do it."

Neither man commented.

Ten minutes later she was talking to Stahlberg. Her obvious relief at finding him gave her an added attraction in his eyes. He expressed delight at her call and at the prospect of seeing her, and promised to help her in any way he could.

After she had cut off, O'Hara said, "Take the launch. I'll allow you twenty minutes each way and twenty minutes to persuade him. But be back in an hour and a half or else call up and say why not."

As her jet-efflux disappeared over Savoy, Kurov said doubtfully, "Your methods seem to depend on all sorts of unreliable variables."

But O'Hara answered only with a satisfied smile. "It will be all right. . . . There's a perfectly good constant involved."

* * *

On Capri it was warm. Stahlberg had landed his ship in a level space behind a beach on the south side of the island. The west cliffs were in ruins from some explosion from the time of the Italian defence of the area in 1979, or possibly the opéra-bouffe attempt of a section of the Italian Communist Party to get rid of Soviet control four years later.

Stahlberg had orginally made a half-hearted rendezvous with Mireille to meet him on the island This had fortunately fallen through He had found Mireille physically exciting but shallow, suitable for a week, but not longer.

Anyway, Elvira's call had delighted him. The tension of her femininity, softened slightly into a pleading to him, highly personally, to help her in some way, was inestimably moving. With Elvira he might perhaps feel that her worry was plain silly, but he would never have that sense of superiority and contempt which a man cannot but feel to a selfishly bitchy woman, however dangerously attractive, however strong and sharp his adoration.

It wasn't at all clear what she wanted. But he'd learnt that in a few minutes. Meanwhile, after a moment's thought, he rubbed a depilatory on his face, and then went into the *Nereid* and packed a small case. He was apparently having to go somewhere with her, and not in his own craft. After a moment he recorded on the communicator a message saying simply that he would be back in a day or two. He had no idea how long he would be away. And he did not wish to say who he was going with. Mireille might conceivably appear in the role of pursuing Fury; and this would hold her off.

The only other boat in the area was that of a very Swedish-looking young man called Larsen, a few hundred yards away. He wondered whether to say anything to him. But he wasn't in sight.

The portable on his wrist now spoke up. "Elvira calling. Martin, I'm coming in. Where do you want me to land?"

"In the sea," he answered. The beach had looked too narrow.

"Isn't there a beach? Oh yes, I can see it—I'll come in there."

He looked up into the sky. High and faint to the northwest was a little flower of flame. He got down behind some boulders and said, "All right, if you can. Switch her safeties to the altitude radar though." He had not thought of her as a pilot, and his respect for her rose.

The jet was coming in fairly fast, and the braking looked as though it were well above three 'g'. She must have been in a hurry. As it swooped in lower, in a great bloom of hydrogen flame, he lay flatter. The 'white noise' hardly affected him, he was so used to it, though his plugs—the latest model—hardly kept out half the hammer of decibels.

Then the noise stopped, with its usually shattering suddenness. He took off his plugs and walked over towards the beach. She had landed beautifully, about half-way up the narrow strip of sand. The compensators held the craft upright automatically on the slight slope. Her jets, just clear of the sand, were still hot. In a moment the door half-way up the little launch opened, and Elvira emerged and came down the ladder.

She was dressed in a fairly tight-fitting one-piece of blouse and trousers the blue of her eyes, but, saying "It's hot here," she ripped off the detachables and converted the lower half

to shorts. Then she said, "Oh, Martin," and came into his arms.

They said nothing for some time. As they walked, still hand in hand, up the beach, he said in a voice which revealed euphoria and excitement, "It's a pity you're in such a hurry. Can't you postpone whatever it is and stay here a few days?"

She looked at him, pleased but anxious and answered, "In a few weeks perhaps. . . . Martin darling, what I want you to help me in is this. . . ."

She told him the same story about the compulsive machine and the proposed delegation as she had given to Custis over the stereo the previous evening.

When she had finished he said, "I'm sure you're quite wrong about Lorimer Vlakhov. He'd never plan a mass compeller himself, and it's very unlikely he'd be the dupe of anyone else. It's probably just an art machine. I can see that John Custis would be furious about that, and so would a lot of other people. But it doesn't worry *me*. On the contrary, I think it's very interesting. But I agree that all this secrecy is ridiculous. Vlakhov is getting into a bureaucratic rut and overdoing it. It'll do him good to have a delegation. I don't care if it is an embarrassing surprise. Perhaps he doesn't need a watchdog, but a gadfly is a good thing anyhow. Apart from that, I'd do it for you. Love seems to me to be more important than politics or machines." He explored her eyes.

"Oh, Martin." She turned away, the tears she so rarely allowed again rising in her eyes. "You're so good." She looked at him again, smiling through them. "We will come back here, just as soon as we can."

A firm, constructive happiness seemed to have penetrated him through. He said "Fine. I'll just get my bag," and walked off towards the *Nereid*.

When he came back, the Swede Larsen was talking to Elvira.

He turned as Stahlberg approached, saying, "It's nice to see another boat landing here occasionally." But Eliva pushed in front of him, and said, "Martin, he's being awful to me."

A surprised look came into Larsen's face and he started, "I don't understand . . ."

"I understand all right," Martin interrupted. "I'd recommend

you to a good psychiatrist, but as I haven't the time, have this instead," and he hit the Swede on the side of the jaw.

As he swung, Larsen's hand went for his pocket. He fell prone on the hand and Stahlberg was surprised to see that he had begun to bring out a blaster.

"That's very queer," he said, "but he seems an odd fellow—landed here two days ago and has just been hanging round."

"Well, we haven't time to bother with him," Elvira said, "and we don't want him chasing us or complaining. Why don't you dope him to stay out for a week or so and put him back in his ship?"

"With hypnin—yes, I could do that. But if you've got some in your medicine case we'd better use that—I can watch him while you get it."

In ten minutes Larsen had been bundled into his own bunk and left there.

"I promised to be back in an hour," Elvira remarked. "We've wasted an awful lot of time."

"We've got ten minutes, haven't we?" Stahlberg smiled confidently. "Let me pilot her. You take a little hypnin yourself, then you won't feel the acceleration if you strap in properly."

"I'll feel bruised afterwards just the same. No, I'll stay conscious and be with you alone, but don't go more than three 'g', it doesn't matter if we're a few minutes late."

They climbed into the control compartment. He took off with one hand.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was Kurov who insisted on the interrogation. Elvira had been sent away with the other technical staff to polish up her knowledge of the various communication channels she would have to use, and the units she would be in touch with during the operation. The General had ordered the maximum practice for everyone and though his right to give such orders had not been formally established at the meeting or any other time, O'Hara quite saw the force of them. Kurov had been particularly rude about the weapon-handling of the Watchdog contribution to the Thaetetus assault party. The more difficult tasks were anyhow to be performed by Bases men, but they expected tolerable covering fire, and the six Watchdogs had now been sent to the French side of the lake to practise with dummies under Captain Siktirenko.

So when Stahlberg sipped the drink O'Hara had offered him he blacked out immediately and fell down on the grass. One of Kurov's officers, a silent hawk-nosed man, at once came forward with a knapsack which he opened to reveal a huge collection of electronic instruments and phials of drugs.

As Kurov stood by, hands on hips, the other went to work. Earplugs and a rhythm-helmet were put on, then a series of injections, some carefully placed in the back of the skull, were made.

After a bit Kurov turned to O'Hara and said, "Psycho-Colonel Lainadze will get any information out of him that's available."

O'Hara answered uneasily, "I still don't like it. He's no fool and he may notice that he's been unconscious, or merely that he's missed a few minutes, and put two and two together. And then he'll be dangerous on the trip."

"Don't worry, he won't know anything," the General answered. "It's a pity we can't give him a compulsive," he went on, "but we'd only have time for a rough job, anyhow."

After a while the Psycho-Colonel looked up and requested, "Permission to speak Citizen General?"

"Go on, man!"

"He knows nothing about the machine in Thaetetus. Nor about Vlakhov's plans. There's no definite indication but I suspect that he's been given a mind block on some information, without his knowledge of course."

"A block on what sort of information?" O'Hara asked.

"Something to do with Vlakhov probably," the officer replied, speaking to his superior.

Kurov said thickly, "If we had a week or two we'd smash any mind block—without subtle methods either! But I suppose we can't wait."

"There may be nothing anyhow," the Colonel put in. "It's only a faint suspicion," and he rose from his kneeling position, dusting his knees as he spoke.

They looked down at the unconscious figure, as it lay on the grass under a thin sunlight. The breeze had lightened, but was still sufficient to ruffle Stahlberg's hair as Colonel Lainadze stooped and removed the helmet.

"It pays to be suspicious," Kurov said finally, "and it was worth trying."

Lainadze smeared an analgesic seal on the injection points, spoke a brief oblivion suggestion into the earphones and then removed them, and finally lifted Stahlberg to his feet. Kurov put his watch back fifteen minutes. O'Hara filled another glass for him and closed his flaccid fingers round it.

He stood there swaying slightly.

Lainadze said sharply, "Drink!"

Stahlberg raised the glass to his lips and looked around. O'Hara's qualms were groundless. All that Stahlberg felt was a passing instant of faintness, not uncommon after a fast jet run. He finished his drink and asked, "When do we start?"

"In about half an hour," the burly man answered.

O'Hara said, "Come into the plastohut and we'll have a snack."

The ship was reported ready while they were still eating, and it was only twenty minutes after Kurov had spoken that take-off took place.

Stahlberg, though he did not much like being piloted by someone else, had to admit that the man at the controls was doing a superb job. The *Syrtis*—as O'Hara's yacht was called—rose with an acceleration which increased with perfect smoothness, and this on manual and with rather a sluggishly tuned ship too. The pilot was a silent and tough-looking young man—very much like the strange character Kurov.

The control room was reasonably large and comfortable, and furnished and padded sufficiently to make it quite a reasonable place to live in (though for fewer people than were in it at present) for runs anywhere within the Inner System. Slots in the floor showed that its rear end could be divided into tiny compartments.

Its equipment was also far better than can be fitted on a small craft. Six separate vision-tanks showed in front of the pilot, giving him a view in all directions—unlike the *Nereid's* single one, which had to be linked into whichever circuit seemed more interesting. The rear screen was showing a rapidly shifting view behind them, of Lake Geneva and an area which increased as he watched, till it covered the whole of Western Europe. The take-off was against the world's turning moment, losing the small advantage which the spin gives a ship. Not more than half-an-hour could possibly be lost using the more orthodox route. They must certainly be in a hurry.

It was pleasant to sit in the relaxer, close to Elvira. Stahlberg began to talk to her in undertones. It soon appeared that three 'g' was going to be the maximum acceleration, and after a while Kurov, hitherto so silent, got up, staggered heavily over to O'Hara, who was on a couch behind the pilot, and began talk to him, also in undertones—presumably on their tactics at the forthcoming interview.

The lot of them seemed to be treating the whole expedition with unnecessary seriousness. There was a tenseness in the air which he found disconcerting—if not downright unpleasant. And he himself seemed, in a way to be a bit of a pariah. But that was probably natural. He was an outsider to them.

And he'd never studied the behaviour of groups like this except in historical documents. Their standards of solemnity were bound to be higher than his.

Anyway, he had Elvira. His study of women was much more adequate. He said to her, "This is rather a gloomy expedition."

She smiled uncertainly, as she lay back on the relaxer. "Yes, I suppose it is. It means more to us than to you."

"The weight will pull at your muscles if you don't relax a little. Three 'g' isn't anything—you will run about like a two-year-old right after landing. In fact I'm surprised they don't use a higher acceleration if they're in such a hurry."

"I expect they want to be in good form when we land," she replied, looking away at the vision tanks. The forward view now looked on to the Moon. The arc of dawn had swept over most of the visible surface, and the satellite was about full. The Mare Imbrium, a blank patch in the northern hemisphere, stuck a great bay into the curve of the Lunar Appenines. Within this arc could be seen the group of craters which was their destination.

She asked, "Tell me about your pass. It sounds like a very clever device."

He explained how the strip of complex metal core, set in non-transparent plastic, could be strapped round his head and at the same time linked to the vessel's call-sign radio. In some way, a carefully preserved secret, this modulated the call-sign with some highly specific rhythm of the brain, and - when it was a question of passing into an automatic alarm field - prevented an alarm being given in the case of registered visitors.

"It takes weeks to do them. Vlakhov only sent mine down the other day, and I was measured for it over a month ago. You can't take the thing apart, it's got a self destroying capsule in it. I expect, as a matter of fact, that the brain rhythm could be mechanically duplicated if enough research was put into it. But they probably take rhythms selected at random out of the organic section lot that are on file with people's psycho-charts. So it wouldn't be easy."

He put on the band, and added, "Look! Do you think it suits me?" For a moment a smile replaced the tense expres-

sion. Then she seemed to shake herself and brightened up into conversation.

* * *

In Aristillus Vlakhov was in his office with Macandrew. A group of screens similar to the ones in the Hamburg hideout covered two walls. At the controls sat an officer in the uniform of a major of the Patrol, whose operations charts were here duplicated. Vlakhov had taken overall control for the decisive hours, leaving operational handling of the fleet to the H.Q. in Cassini.

Peggy wheeled in Hayakawa, looking perfectly healthy. Vlakhov looked up. "Hullo, H-H," he said. "I thought you were resting. I suppose you couldn't miss this. But don't interrupt when things get going. Peggy, you'd better put him in that corner, where he can't get in the way."

"It's all right, Vlakhov. I'll relax," the physicist snapped in a tone which gave little promise of his keeping his word. "I thought I'd come and see what was up. Peggy told me that Martin Stahlberg was caught by them and I felt I couldn't fidget around in my room."

"Fair enough." A slight smile came on to Vlakhov's rather worried face, as he went on. "That's the only really nasty point at the moment. Everything else is under control."

"Well, relax then, you look as though you're overworking."

"Don't worry about that, I'm quite used to it." And it was true, Vlakhov's appearance, though strained, was that of powerful reserves capable of bearing that strain indefinitely.

So Hayakawa merely replied, "Well, if there's a moment to spare, as appears, tell me all about it."

"About Martin? Oh, he somehow gave Larsen the slip. It's very difficult to get experienced agents these days, and it probably wasn't too difficult. Why did they want Martin? Oh, he has a pass, of course."

The physicist saw the point. "What are you doing about that?"

"Well"— Vlakhov looked a trifle grimmer -"it's dangerous for Martin either way, but on the whole I'm glad they've got a motive for getting started. We've known about this plot in a general way for some time. But we can't really uproot it until

it's forced into the open. I've let it develop—you can see the political snags about exposing it. A lot of people would think it was just a private vendetta of my department against the Watchdogs. And they'd certainly get off for lack of satisfactory evidence, anyhow."

He leant back in his chair for a minute and nodded at the back of the Patrol Major, continuing, "We hope to sort out the plot properly. And we are almost certain the Bases are involved. The Patrol's appreciation is that the latest raids and appearances of Base ships has been designed to secure a dispersion of the Patrol Fleet. If O'Hara and Co. can pull off a coup, it would be logical to have the Bases fleet thrown in at the right moment."

"Here, you mean?" Hayakawa sounded astonished.

"Yes—in the Earth-Moon system at least."

"What are you doing about Stahlberg's pass?"

"I haven't decided. At present the field is set to let him through. I shall have to wait and see if anything else develops. If nothing has happened by the time they approach, I'll let them through. If they failed in that they might postpone the whole thing, for all I know—not that I know what they're after even now. It may be just an innocent delegation after all—covering something else perhaps."

Macandrew came in from the front office and said, "O'Hara and Co. took off an hour ago. They'll soon be within detection range. I'll get a spare stereo in."

Vlakhov explained to Hayakawa, "I've got a small viewer concealed on O'Hara's ship."

"But they'll detect that at once."

"No, it's undectectable. Sub-wave—Manchip developed it. What's more it'll solve the time-lag problem when we get sufficient range for it—instantaneous transmission from planet to planet. How do you like that?"

"It's a damned candal," the scientist bellowed, adding in parenthesis, "Damn this heavy great lung, it feels very bulky when I shout." He continued hotly, "Physicists working for your department don't get told what's going on even in a field not so far from their own. I don't . . ."

But Vlakhov interrupted ironically, "So you're against secrecy too. Wait till the Bases get it, eh? And how would it

have helped your work? You've got the warp equations—the basis of it all."

Hayakawa only said shortly, "There's no such thing as instantaneous."

"I don't want to argue philosophy with you. I thought you accepted the warp equations—which amount to the same thing. And anyhow it works." He turned to Macandrew and said, "See if you can get them."

First fuzzily, and then with great clarity, a view of the inside of the *Syrtis* control room appeared in the stereo tank the mulatto had set up on one of the guest chairs. The viewer was evidently hidden in the wall to the left of the vessel's controls, and gave an excellent outlook on the whole scene.

"There's O'Hara and there's Martin Stahlberg and that's the girl Jones—I can see how Martin got involved—and the thick-set one is the other—what's his name, Caleb?"

"The one talking to O'Hara? I don't know, though there have been reports of a man of that description."

After a pause Vlakhov added, "Do you think he looks millitary, Major Hartley?"

"Yes, I see what you mean But there are a lot of old ex-soldiers around. You were thinking he might be a Bases man?"

"All right," Vlakhov conceded, "but now look at the pilot. Wouldn't you say he held himself a little over-upright?"

The Major looked more closely. "Yes, he certainly looks very military- more than most fighting men in fact."

"More than a Patrol Officer, certainly. Your lot wouldn't have been tolerated in the old 175th," said Vlakhov, while Hayakawa winked broadly. But Vlakhov went on imperturbably, "That pilot's a young man. He couldn't have been in the war. Is he an ex-Patrol officer?"

"I'm sure he isn't," Major Hartley said emphatically, "I know all of them, by sight at least. It's not a big force."

"Let's assume that he and the older man are Bases Liaison. In that case I think we'll have action before they reach the alarm field." He stared again at the screen. Stahlberg and Elvira were talking quietly, in an unmistakably sexual ambience. Kurov had a bief word with O'Hara.

"It's a pity they had to have a guide," Macandrew said; "they might have given us some information otherwise."

Vlakhov said, mainly to Hayakawa, "It's a pity Martin's there, from a personal point of view. He's certainly in great danger, one way or another. But if it had to be someone I'd rather him than most. You know they tried to get Custis first? He just isn't quick enough."

"Peggy said something about that," Hayakawa replied. "I understood that you've sent a launch for him?"

"Yes, it should be here in a couple of hours."

"Then," said the physicist, "all the old regiment, except the C O —who's now a mystic in Tibet, or so I was told the other day—will be in on this fight. All of us chairborne, except Martin," he added in a more anxious tone.

"Yes," Vlakhov replied, "we're well protected. I've got an armoured task force out in the Mare, if it comes to that. But keep quiet now, H-H. They're only a few minutes beyond the alarm screen I'll have to decide about letting them in very soon if they try coming in against the alarm they'll run into a mass of self-directed missiles But I don't think they'll try," he added half to himself.

At this moment one of Hartley's screens became red with a sparkle of 'Hostile craft' and a voice said, "Bases fleet detected by light cruiser *Amis* approaching on course shown. *Amis* has ceased reporting Numbers estimated at forty to fifty."

Hartley said, "Phew, that's a lot And I don't like the *Amis* not reporting she's one of the 'Poet' class, you know, not superfast but she should have been able to show a Bases ship a clean pair of heels and she's quite heavily armed too. . . . They're coming almost straight out of the nadir," he added, looking at the sinister red lights.

"Surely you can outfight an old fleet that size?" said Vlakhov.

"Oh yes, though of course the Commodore is going to have to disperse a lot of weight to guard various vulnerable approaches, and keep a screen of light craft out in all directions, in case there's another enemy fleet."

"Four minutes till I have to decide about O'Hara's lot —I'd better keep them out," Vlakhov remarked He looked again at the screen to the *Syrtis* where Stahlberg had strapped his pass-strip on his head and was now standing with it plugged in to the control board.

At that moment Hartley said suddenly, "My screens are dead."

Macandrew left the room, saying, "I'll fix them." He returned a few minutes later with bad news.

"We're cut off from the outside entirely. There's an absorber up round us. They're looking for the generator. It must be at the centre of the effect."

"But this screen's working," Vlakhov said, pointing to the screen to the *Syrtis*.

Hayakawa said brusquely, "It's sub-wave, you said. It wouldn't be affected by an absorber field."

"Try the alarms, chief," Macandrew said urgently. "I'll go and see if anything can be done."

Vlakhov turned the switch. No acknowledging light came on the circuit. He turned to the others and said slowly, "Although this proves an ability to strike, and a resourcefulness we had not sufficiently anticipated, and although we ourselves may perhaps be eliminated, I can assure you that the plot has virtually no chance of success. But now it has a chance of causing a lot of destruction and damage." He put his arm round Peggy as if to console her, though she had shown no sign of tears or other undue excitement.

"So it's true about you and Peggy, then," Hayakawa said, in an interested tone.

"Why, you old . . ."

But Peggy's retort was interrupted by Macandrew, who came in almost breathless and said:

"There's a field generator in the crawler cellar. They can't get at it, as it's protected by a field of its own—not a permanent one but the interruptions are so rapid that they can't get through without equipment we haven't got. We need a hyperon resonator to heterodyne it. There isn't one in the crater."

"Let's hope they haven't managed a coup in Patrol H.Q. too," Vlakhov said sombrely. "Tell me if you catch the culprit—if he's still here. Meanwhile there's nothing to do but watch Stahlberg's adventures."

They grouped around the screen. In the control room of the *Syrtis* O'Hara and Kurov stood, with a triumphant look, behind Stahlberg, who was now removing his head band. The ship must be well within the defence perimeter. The group

on the ship sat down in gravity-seats close behind the pilot's chair. On the rear screen above appeared the crater of Thaetetus, the seat of PACIC—recognizable to Vlakhov and the others familiar with the region.

"I wonder what they're up to? Seizing the secret projects en route perhaps? Even if Martin realizes it's Thaetetus and not Aristillus, which he won't, he will have no reason to be suspicious," Vlakhov said hopelessly. It was quite true. They could only hope that Stahlberg could somehow sense the situation. There were no signs of such a miracle.

They were coming in to the last half-minute of the landing manœuvre. Behind Stahlberg, Kurov was slowly drawing a blaster.

Rocks, then a level space, loomed detailed in the ship's rear vision-tanks. As the rockets roared for the last two hundred metres of the descent, cancelling the remains of the craft's downward speed, Stahlberg reached upward with a single movement and tore the switches out of the control board. It was a beautifully timed manœuvre, calculated to let the ship crash from a height sufficient to knock out everyone on board, without destroying itself completely.

Immediately all was pandemonium aboard. Kurov tried to get a line on Stahlberg for a shot. Elvira had risen and was screaming. Then there was a crash and the screen before Vlakhov and his companions went black.

Stahlberg's greatest talent, interest in women's moods, had paid off.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When Stahlberg opened his eyes, he was in bed. The feeling of lightness in his body's downward pressure on the mattress told him that he was on the Moon, though the room—an ordinary enough bedroom with gilt walls might have been anywhere.

But he had hardly looked round when Custis and Hayakawa entered, the latter now walking without his wheelchair, though slowly even in this mild gravity field.

"One at a time, for heaven's sake," Stahlberg cried, as their accounts of recent events competed, Hayakawa's staccato bark cancelling Custis' slower and heavier excitement into what was virtually informationless noise, from which he only gathered that he was in Aristillus and that a battle of some sort was raging. Eventually a coherent story emerged, including Custis' eventual rescue (fortunately Ranchevski had had a chess-set).

"They just got to you in time," Hayakawa told Stahlberg. "The air was leaking out."

"Any losses?" Stahlberg asked in no especial tone.

"The pilot and Hendricks are very badly injured the cleverest thing you did was to get back into your seat. They were trying to get at you, apparently, and were thrown right across the control room. Your girl friend and O'Hara are all right, and so is Kurov—they think he's a Bases liaison man incidentally. But there were ten others, with a very tough assortment of weapons, back in the spare fuel space, and they

were all killed. How did you guess they were up to no good?"

Stahlberg smiled. "I hadn't noticed anything at all, but I'm pretty good, I flatter myself, at following women's feelings. Elvira, who isn't all that excitable, was unbelievably tense So I thought I'd look at the men—I don't usually bother about men's moods and I had some difficulty in getting my attention to them. But in the end they struck me as a bit over-tense, too. Then I noticed bulges which looked like blasters to me—I'd just had a chap draw one on me back in Capri."

"That was one of Lorimer Vlakhov's agents trying to save you, as a matter of fact," Hayakawa put in. "So you managed to escape both sides."

"Really? I wondered what he was up to. Anyhow, in the *Syrtis* the whole thing began to look very odd, and I suddenly remembered that I was supposed to be an expert on *coups d'état*—where else would you have a coup but up here?"

Hayakawa described the heterodyning of the field around Aristillus by technicians from the Mare Imbrium task force.

A series of heavy rumbles shook the floor of the room.

"What's that then, if everything's in hand?" Stahlberg inquired with natural interest.

Hayakawa answered, "Oh, they managed to blow up the control tower at Patrol HQ, and sneaked in a small party in a very fair imitation of a Patrol tender They're holed up in a craterlet twenty kilometres south. They've got a defensive field and it would take a sit down siege to reduce them So the Patrol is trying to blow the whole sphere of the field, craterlet and all, right off the Moon unbroken. It's too distracting to have them so near with the battle having to be controlled."

"How is the battle now?"

"Pretty well, apparently. Some small raiders got through to the Earth. There's been a lot of sabotage and fighting with little groups down there We've had some naval losses but it was well in hand when we left Vlakhov," the physicist replied

Custis remarked in a rather querulous tone, "I still don't really know what the rights and wrongs of it are. Anyhow, one undoubtedly good thing among all the muddle is that you were saved. It was a very near thing. You were in a near-vacuum for several seconds. You've collected a crop of redlines on your face."

Horrified at the thought of being disfigured by the broken

veins usual to spacemen who have suffered brief exposure to very low pressures, Stahlberg leapt from the bed before the others could protest, and looked at himself in a mirror on the wall He studied the effect for a minute and then said, "On the whole it doesn't look too bad—even rather distinguished in a way except the nose. I'll have to have that done over."

Custis exchanged glances with Hayakawa and replied, "They're hardly visible anyway."

"What did the doctor say about my staying up? I feel perfectly all right."

"Oh, he said you could get up and come along a few minutes after you woke. You've to take the pill on the sideboard."

Stahlberg slipped on a pair of all-purposes which hung on the wall and swallowed the pill. "Where are we going?" he inquired.

"Along to Vlakhov's office."

"Won't we be in the way?"

"No, he says that he won't be involved actively in the operations from now on, unless some very unforeseen matter arises. He wants us to watch what happens."

When they walked through the outer office, Peggy was back at her usual desk, but looking more radiant, and more in control, than ever Hayakawa did not venture more than a carefully unmeaning smile. Stahlberg, who was not aware of the earlier scene, paused for a moment, much taken by the radiance, but after the merest instant's thought he also merely smiled and said, "Hullo, Peggy Good to see you!"

Inside the office the sub-wave vision tank had been cleared away. Major Hartley was at the controls of the main tanks and Vlakhov was sitting with three chairs drawn up beside him, behind the great desk, whose heavy equipment of voders, communicators and other devices were retracted into its interior.

Vlakhov waved them to their chairs without taking his eyes off the stereo. A lieutenant in the Intelligence room at Patrol H.Q. was giving a resumé:

"Enemy resistance on Earth has virtually ceased. Raids on London, Accomac City, Brazzaville and Lhasa were frustrated by emergency absorption fields The other capitals -Canberra and Cuzco have been seriously damaged, as our fields' nodes were near the broadcasting centres and were blown up along

with them Nearly half the main broadcasters are out of action. The enemy lost six ships in these raids. One of ours, the light cruiser *Jennings*, was destroyed on the ground at Cuzco.

"In the space battle the enemy has lost twenty six ships. Three have escaped Their flagship, mounting a self-sustaining field, is englobed by our squadron, and no further action is being taken against her at present, in accordance with Director Vlakhov's orders.

"We have over fifty prisoners, most of them captured unconscious.

"Our losses have been eighteen ships, mainly cruisers; reducing the squadron to six, plus very light local defense craft. Four more are being sent urgently from Mars."

The young officer on the screen saluted and moved away as Vlakhov turned to the others, saying

"Whew! A far bigger loss than we expected. The Bases had a lot of ships, and a lot of better weapons than they ought to have Our secrecy programme wasn't strict enough. We knew that, of course, but we underestimated the effect."

Hartley said, "I'll get a report from Interrogation. They'll have reports on some of the prisoners by now."

After a minute a fresh figure appeared on the screens, a tubby little captain beaming enthusiastically and reporting what seemed the best news yet "We've got higher rankers for a change, and enough of them too. I'm getting hints under hypnosis—one almost certain location, already, and several others looking promising."

Hartley acknowledged and switched him off, saying to the others:

"I'm rather doubtful about these psychologically-deduced locations. People's memories—even a lot of them are very inaccurate when it comes to pin-pointing one rock out of millions out in the Belt—I expect we'll get their Venus base that way though, if there really is one But fortunately an old investment has now produced the goods. Half of their ships were converted freighters seized on raids, and the department has been building automatic track recorders into all freighters for years not the broadcasting type, of course, or they'd have been located at once, we have to retrieve them. And now we've got half a dozen intact."

"Give us a look at the battlefield, Major," Vlakhov interposed.

The lights dimmed. One of the screens became black, with a few faint sparks.

"This is a view of the area, about twenty degrees ahead of the Moon and 80,000 kilometres inside its orbit, where the heaviest fighting took place. I'll step up the magnification."

The sparks grew and separated, as if the watchers were plunging toward them in an impossibly fast rocket.

Soon one could just be identified as a very large vessel, white hot all over.

"An enemy heavy—the *Pavlik Morzov*—some slow reaction started in her," Hartley commented. The view passed round and showed two others close together.

"They're shining by reflected light only. They'll be an enemy converted freighter and a Patrol light cruiser—probably the *Wain*. They're only thirty kilometres apart. You won't quite be able to see the tenders going between them. . . . I think we'd better get back to the Squadron, Director, if we're not going to miss the climax."

"All right."

Hartley addressed the screen. "Patrol Director here, put us through to the flagship's bridge. We only want to watch his battle. Tell him not to bother to speak to us."

After a moment the darkness of the stereo gave place to a view of an operations room. At first only a door and a couple of lieutenants could be seen, but then someone must have adjusted the viewer, for they had a clear aspect of the warship's vision-tanks. The largest, into which they were looking directly, showed a large ship, apparently hanging motionless in the blackness of space.

"That's the enemy," Hartley stated. "Our ships are englobing it at about twenty kilometres. She's big, isn't she?"

The great black hull shone grimly in the emptiness that was its natural element. Every detail was visible; they could even read the ship's name on its bows—*Andrei Zhdanov*.

A screen to the left showed the battle's layout, the red oval in the centre surrounded by white ones with labels, a couple of light craft, *Enright* and *Martian Girl*, a medium, *Andromeda*, and the flagship *Samarkand* itself. In front of and behind the enemy ran the two remaining heavy battleships, *Valmy*

and *Imjin*. Three other light cruisers, *Larkin*, *Gunn* and *Holloway*, were patrolling out in front, right at the edge of the screen.

No action was being taken. After a minute or two Stahlberg drew attention to this.

Vlakhov retorted, "Yes, Corporal Stahlberg—I presume you were allowed to keep your rank as an honorary title after the war? I know nothing is happening. We have been holding her in like this for several hours, only bombarding her with appeals to surrender and accounts of the battle and of our clues to her Base."

He went on less acidly, "She's a large, and tough proposition. She mounts full conversion screens, and can absorb everything we throw at her. I don't want her coming back earthwards; she may have a lot of trouble on board. This way we may even get her to surrender. Those Bases types are very ill-balanced really. And this is putting a lot of pressure on whoever's in charge. It's surprising they haven't done something already."

Hartley added, "She was heading on a curve that would have got her to Earth. We had to throw the *Vega* straight into her. Their screens reduced the *Vega* to neutrinos without trouble—that shows her power—but of course they could do nothing about the inertia, which was transferred to them, and forced them into a safe course. She can't change course again because the *Imjin* would pepper her when her field came down to let the jet out. At this rate we can starve her out if necessary."

The Commodore's voice came from the screen, "*Imjin*, close up a few kilometres. And, *Enright*, I want you to make a few passes at her. Over."

"*Imjin* closing. Out."

"*Enright* will dive at her from north-west zenith, then south-east nadir."

"*Enright*. Maximum distance please."

"Go to within three kilometres first time, and slightly less second. Repeat the manœuvre after ten minutes. Cut your drive five seconds before closed approach, don't fire. Put all your power into your protective field."

"*Enright*. Understand. Out."

Stahlberg said, "Does he expect to provoke the enemy into lowering his fields and having a crack at her?"

The *Enright* made her first pass at the *Andrei Zhdanov*, coming into the main video-tank in a close cut across the enemy's bows.

"That," Vlakhov replied, "or . . ." as a colossal white blast hit the screen—"this."

"What's happened?"

"She's blown herself up She was in a hopeless position and could either do that or surrender. We gave her a chance to take an enemy with her."

On the *Samarkand* the Commodore was saying, "*Enright* Report."

After a long minute, the reply came, "Am a total wreck. Crew safe in life compartments. But pick us up quick, or we won't be. Most of us have radiation burns, shock or fractures."

"Good. We'll soon come up to you. Well done, Jack!" the Commodore wiped his forehead, and said, "Spectro."

"Spectro. Aye Aye."

"Give me an analysis of that radiation."

"Analysis shows high in cobalt. She must have been carrying at least half a dozen cobalt bombs."

"Roger. Out."

Vlakhov now said to Hartley, "You can switch us out now. Everything is over. "We'll have a rest Peggy," he shouted, "bring us some coffee."

Custis, looking stunned, asked slowly, "Cobalt bombs? Do you mean they were going to drop them on Earth?"

Vlakhov looked at him pensively, as Peggy came in with the coffee, and finally remarked:

"Yes. . . . They probably thought it would be quite serious It would have been pretty bad, at that. We had emergency plans for bringing the population in under large-area tuned absorption fields, which would have let the air in and kept the cobalt out. And eventually we would have reconverted the whole atmosphere, I suppose But it would have made life on Earth very unpleasant for quite a time."

"But why should they do that? They're idealists in their way." Custis shook his head.

"Oh, come, John, you know what idealists are like, you saw it all in the war!" Stahlberg put in.

"I don't mean the Bases, I meant the Watchdogs," Custis elaborated.

"Oh, some of them were amiable dunderheads, no doubt. But there's another thing. There has been a very strong Watchdog attempt to get hold of the photon drive. Now, there are lots of other secret developments. Why should the Watchdogs want that in particular? For the Bases, certainly; it couldn't be built secretly on the planets. But why did the Bases want it? It isn't a weapon, and couldn't be without a lot of development—and even then it'll be entirely an annihilation weapon which idealists would presumably not want to see used. And it isn't outstandingly superior to the present drive for work within the Solar System."

Custis, though dazed, could follow his argument and said with gradually increasing conviction, "They wanted it to escape to some other system. And the Watchdog leaders must have known that. They would have gone too, and wrecked the Earth before taking off, if they couldn't seize power."

"That's probably it. We'll get further proof later no doubt. Incidentally"—Vlakhov turned to Stahlberg—"Kurov *was* a Bases man; a General apparently."

Stahlberg asked, "Did they get the photon-drive plans?"

Hayakawa laughed and answered, "No. Lorimer made me plant phoneys on Ben van Vlissingen, who hadn't much of an idea about the technical side. Van must have given them to his friends. Any time they use them they'll blow up an asteroid and save us all trouble."

"Yes, that's what happened," Vlakhov said.

"Well, I'm sorry Van really did turn out to be a blasted plotter," Hayakawa cried angrily, "he always seemed . . ."

Vlakhov interrupted, sipping his coffee, "No, he wasn't a plotter. He thought he was just giving data to a deserving physicist who was kept from his rightful access to it by bureaucratic security rules. Judged for himself you know—the opposite of democratic centralism, as Kurov would say."

Custis was leaning forward with his chin in his hand, his coffee ignored.

"Come on, John. Don't take it too seriously. We all make mistakes," Vlakhov remarked encouragingly. "Look how many bloomers I made today and yesterday. Martin saved me from one of them. . . . By the way, Major Hartley, has there

been any report about why the plotters wanted to bust into PACIC?"

"Yes; they intended to use it over the air as a super-compulsive."

"It would have to be something Like that. . . . It might even have had some slight effect too," Vlakhov said meditatively, "but, of course, they took it for granted that it was already a compulsive because that's the sort of thing they think a government would produce if it could. Lucky they didn't form a government, or they'd turn us all into zombies."

Custis now sat up and said in tones of deep sincerity and conviction, "Lorimer, all this is horrifying—cobalt bombs, compulsives. . . . I can see how all your measures and secrecy has all justified itself. I want to think over PACIC as a general idea. But, in principle, I'll never question the Government's motives again."

Stahlberg finished his coffee and remarked with a smile, "There's no need to overdo it either way. I'll certainly question the Government's motives whenever I feel like it. It's quite right in these particular matters, but that doesn't make it infallible. And I still think Liberty plus accurate psychology makes an unsolved problem. Have you got anything stronger to drink than this coffee?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Custis, six months later, was looking out across the Martian landscape.

It is sometimes maintained that the most beautiful view in the Solar System is from one of the Saturnian satellites. Not only is Saturn itself a striking sight from close up, especially in its crescent phase, but it is possible to see at the same time up to half-a-dozen variously coloured satellites each with a visible disc, a display unexampled in the Solar System, except to a lesser degree and with a less remarkable planet, in the Jovian region. (It is never possible to see more than two or three heavenly bodies at other than points of light anywhere in the Inner Planets.) Moreover, if the view is from Titan, there is just enough atmosphere to soften the sharpness of space and give colour to the appearance of the sky. But not many people have been out to Titan. And the commoner judgment is in favour of Mars. The sky has not so many properties. But the Earth and its Moon make a splendid double Evening Star, Jupiter can be seen much larger and finer than it is from Earth, and though Deimos, the outermost of Mars's satellites, looks little larger than a bright star, Phobos, the other, shows a disc a quarter as large as the Moon seen from Earth, as it races through the zenith twice a day.

And Mars, unlike Titan, has richly varying landscapes. Perhaps that was one of the reasons that the domes round the Martian settlements are made entirely of transparent plastics, not like the partly opaque-walled cities on the Moon. They

were, of course, constructed later; even Port Lowell was not settled until 1985.

The dome Custis was looking from was small and new, a mere base and dormitory for one section of the Atmosphere Project. Outside was none of the richness of the thicker vegetation areas like the Syrtis or the Mare Serpentis. Instead, the dragon's-blood sand of the great desert of Memnonia stretched away eastwards, flecked only by occasional green, blue or brown patches of scrub. The sky, on the horizon, was blue, with the faintest wisps of distant cirrus, but deepened quickly into a near-black at the zenith. The sun, smaller than when seen from Earth, flamed down with the same apparent brightness – it is only out beyond the Jovian system that the mechanism of the eye finds too little light to give it the same satisfaction as at home.

Even though this was not one of the more picturesque of Martian views, Custis found something of extreme visual beauty in the scene. The area – selected indeed with that in mind – was comparatively flat and featureless, but there was sufficient variation in colour and aspect to avoid monotony. And it had, in the direction he was looking, that special quality of calm and of what Harris has called 'fineness' that people look for on Mars. There is nothing rough, crude or edgy in any Martian view. Eons of gentle winds have eroded the rocks into an equally gentle smoothness, or into sand.

But all this is only true of Mars in its untouched state. As Custis turned half left and leant forward to see through the window of his cramped little room (scarcely better than a cubicle), the view changed. A kilometre or so away lay a large and glittering metallic structure, mounted on heavy tractor treads – one of the generating nodes of the ten-kilometre square conversion field which was engaged in turning the desert into oxygen. Beyond it, as the field sank slowly into the sand, a continual haze of warmish gas passed upwards, carried away to the south by a light wind, slightly thickening the whole sky in that direction.

Custis supposed that a really habitable Mars was a great advance; either way he could only feel thankful at one undoubted good deed already performed by the machines. This particular field (only one among hundreds in the Atmosphere Project) had orginally been set up fifteen kilometres further

north. And there, after two months operation, it had uncovered, deep down in the ancient sand, the ruins. As soon as Vlakhov had heard of them he had at once let Custis know privately, so that he had been able to get himself sent out as one of the Institute's representatives, and in advance of the others.

While on the liner he had had a call from Lorimer Vlakhov himself. A great deal of work had had to be cleared up in the past months, but now the Director of Projects had been able to get away, ostensibly, and in part really, to inspect progress in the atmosphere on Mars, and had followed the slow *Sirius*-class vessel in a Patrol ship, actually reaching Port Lowell before Custis. The latter had found the long trip on the liner, with all its swimming pools, dance floors and other amenities, intolerably dull.

Even so, administrative details had kept Vlakhov at the capital for some days, and Custis was the first on this, the most interesting site, by several hours. It was with difficulty that he had restrained himself from going out alone to the ruins. But he doubted if the manager would spare him a crawler.

The sound of a gong came over the speaker, and it went on: "This the 1400 hours edition of the *Port Lowell Gazette*. Your reporter interviewed Director Vlakhov a few minutes ago on his departure from our capital to visit the stations of the Atmosphere Project. Here is the tape of the interview, already stereocast live."

Not very enthusiastically Custis switched on the stereo, which cleared to show a scene on the huge transparent balcony of the Port Lowell Spaceport. In the foreground was Vlakhov, in ordinary Earth clothes, facing half-a-dozen recording and casting instruments. Outside a sandstorm was blowing, slightly dimming the prospect of the city's proliferation of great transparent bubbles to the right, and seven or eight spacecraft of the largest sort—liners and long-range battlecruisers—out to the left.

Vlakhov answered a series of questions about the Atmosphere Project in a suitably optimistic way, and retorted to some of the usual Martian cracks about hidebound old Earth with the particular style of frivolity now fashionable. Finally

the reporter got round to a question which Custis found more interesting:

"Mr. Vlakhov, you're the first member of the Government to come here since the crisis. Can you say a few words about its lesson, and how great the danger really was?"

Vlakhov turned squarely into the main recorder, paused a moment and said finally:

"In my opinion the danger to our planets was never very great. There was a risk that we might have suffered far greater damage than we did. And we might easily not have had our successes in clearing out the Bases — there are possibly still one or two small ones left, by the way.

"But our form of society is deeply rooted. The Government had taken such precautions as are possible in a democracy. And the plans of the enemy were defective in a number of respects. I am sure the odds were heavily in our favour and we could not have lost bar accident." His smile grew even more stern as he went on, "But there's the snag, of course. Accidents *do* happen. It is a sobering thought that our whole future might have been forfeit if luck had run strongly on the other side. For we must not underestimate the danger: a dictatorship based on mass psycho-compulsion is virtually safe for perpetuity. After a fusion-bomb war, the remnants of civilization can start developing again, but not after a compulsivist victory."

Outside Custis' window a small stratojet came in with a burst of yellow flame, to land on the little field. Inside, behind him, Vlakhov's voice went on answering some further question:

"No, I don't think this is the last danger civilization will face. But, no, I've no idea what future troubles we'll have."

Custis switched the set off; but the speaker immediately came on again on the private line, ending his waiting by saying, "Mr. Custis, Mr. Vlakhov has arrived in the Manager's office."

Pulling on a pair of coveralls Custis went to the lift. The Manager's office was not in the dome proper, but a couple of hundred metres above it, at the top of a metal trellis-tower, with a reasonable general view of the whole operation.

When Custis entered the Manager was evidently completing a description of his work. He and Vlakhov stood by the great

curved window which formed the half of the wall in the direction of the field-generators, and he pointed out across the oxygen haze and the cooling sands

Vlakhov smiled at Custis, but did not interrupt the speaker, who turned his plump, enthusiastic face to the newcomer and waved to include him in the conversation.

". . . in six years we'll have a real atmosphere. You'll be able to breathe without a mask, after taking a few weeks acclimatization, and keeping yourself drugged with pneumin. In ten years it'll be adequate without that.—I was just giving Mr Vlakhov our progress report for this site, Mr. Custis. We've almost caught up with schedule in spite of the delay caused by the shift from your ruins."

"Hullo, John." Vlakhov's swarthy expression held just the same calm look in this satisfactory tour of a peaceful success as it had in the tense days of the plot. The only differences were that his veins showed a little more redly, the effect of the corpuscle multiplier drug, and his chin seemed rather bluer. The Martian domes were maintained at a lower pressure than the Moon's, to give enough acclimatization to make the transit to the lower pressures outside possible with only an oxygen mask; but depilating became a difficult and tender business.

"Talking of the ruins . . ." Custis said in an impatient tone, "I hope you're nearly ready to come out and look at them."

"I was just telling Mr Vlakhov," the Manager put in, "that I'd rather not spare a man to take you over but fortunately he can drive a crawler himself. There's one ready outside."

"Oh, fine." Custis could see the vehicle parked on a stretch of hard-packed sand half a mile outside the dome, which also served as a landing field. Two small stratoyachts lay beyond it.

A few minutes later, their personal masks properly checked, they went through the airlock and were outside on the Martian soil. Warmly dressed, though not in the rather unpleasant completeness of a spacesuit, they could only feel the thin atmosphere plucking at their skin as a minor oddness, a sort of numb tickling. Still, it added to the curious, sensuous effect of the strange little world. Seen from this level it became apparent that the dome was situated at the edge of a small oasis. A blue foam of froth-alga—looking soft and fine,

though actually as tough as coral spread out into the clean planes and curves of the Memnonia desert. Scattered about it here and there lay the vivid green spheres of roller-plants, and occasional purple or brown patches of scrub-lichen. The Little sun beat down from the blue-black zenith with some of the dream-effect of a violet artificial outdoor light at night on Earth.

Like many other visitors to the planet, but more strongly, Custis felt reluctant to miss an instant or an aspect of the peculiar and moving visual effects. He felt unfairly hurried even by the slow pace of Vlakhov's walk to the crawler, and was irritated when his friend finally sealed the driving compartment, brought the air up to breathable pressure and drove off.

As a matter of fact Vlazhov had exercised unwonted tact in not interrupting his friend's reveries. Now he said, "It'll take us half-an-hour to reach these ruins. By the way, Tulling tells me they aren't much to look at. How did you like him?" he added provocatively.

"Not much."

The tracks slapped quickly along the sand, jarring occasionally on a hidden rock.

"Well, he's doing a good job. . . . I didn't like to tell him, but as a matter of fact we're developing a converter small enough to fit into one's throat and give one sufficient oxygen whatever the atmosphere—so long as its pressure is sufficient, of course. But I suppose it's nicer to feel completely at home—though they tell me one won't be able to feel this gadget once it's in. It'll be useful on Venus, anyhow. . . .

"It's always the same thing nowadays," Vlakhov went on. "Technological progress is so quick that by the time a scheme is in large-scale operation it's theoretically obsolete. Twenty years ago they started the project to provide a Martian atmosphere by heavy planting of great areas of oxyferous vegetation. A huge effort, for those days, went into it. But it would have taken centuries to have a proper effect, though even now it has improved the pressure slightly."

"Will the photon drive be out of date soon?" Custis inquired. "What about this warp theory stuff and your subspace radio?"

"I was arguing with H-H about that very thing. He says—

quite rightly that warp theory, even if it ever produces an instantaneous matter-transporter, will certainly require a machine at both ends, so that the first trip must be done by ship. But what's the next development beyond our present warp theory? And when will it come?" He rubbed his gloves together uneasily and went on, "Anyhow, no one would ever start anything if we waited Sally and Jones would never have started for Mars if they'd waited for the converter-drive." He loosed round the landscape of a planet won by the methods then available, and which would be made habitable by methods now available. "We haven't an idea what they'd do in a hundred or two hundred years hence Move the whole planet nearer the sun maybe—if gravities ever gets going. Or turn Phobos into a little sun of its own, as Clarke suggested"

"Mars seems to me . . ." Custis paused and started again. "It'll become a trifle ordinary when it's fit for general habitation."

"Don't you believe it. It'll never be half as crowded as Earth. There won't be any sign of man on three-quarters of the planet . . . Still, if you think this is your last chance to see it as it is, why don't you stay for a few years? I could attach you to the Project as staff archaeologist we nearly missed these ruins by only giving general instructions to our people about preserving artefacts"

The crawler slewed over to the right as it left the high desert plateau to cross a deep gully full of vegetation, an offshoot of the Mare Sirenum. Custis noted with approval that Vlakhov was doing his best to avoid crushing any of the plants. Doubtless he too felt obscurely that the life that had had so precarious a grip on this planet needed the more careful treatment.

Custis finally answered the question in what he felt was a suitably businesslike way. "Well, I'm staying a few months anyhow. . . . Can I decide after that?"

"Of course" (the machine was now halfway up the other side of the gully, taking it rather slowly), "but don't get too excited about the views we had a sad case four or five years ago, a man called Veles got completely obsessed. People can be pretty isolated on Mars if they don't live in a big settlement, and it was months before they discovered that he was trying

to do a painting of every inch of the Lacus Solis. He's all right now."

There was a lurch and they were on the plateau again.

Changing the subject twice to make sure, Custis said quickly, "This is one vehicle even Martin Stahlberg could hardly frighten one in. . . . What do you think about these ruins?"

"I've only seen the stereocasts and the mock-up at Port Lowell, the same as you. They look pretty nondescript to me."

"The radiologists say they're over half-a-million years old," Custis retorted possessively, "and the field did some damage to them too."

"Only the top two or three metres. In fact the actual excavation afterwards, though none of our business, was done very effectively by our people with only all the top archaeologists in the world to guide them by subspace stereo—at least we didn't have to wait ten minutes between question and answer. There was nothing more irritating in the old days than to show something to the man in the stereo-tank you were supposed to be conversing with, and then see his face looking dopey for ages before finally lighting up with intelligent recognition."

They had now reached what looked like a broad flat road, but which, Vlakhov explained, was one of the tracks left by a conversion-node vehicle on its move to its new location by a route which avoided the gully. And a few minutes later they were at the edge of the depression where the field had operated previously.

They had reached it at the corner where the node whose track they had been following had been stationed. The work done on the site was impressive. Stretching right away out to the horizon the ground to the east and south had been cut away to a depth of thirty metres. The edges had fallen in to some extent, and formed a slope of red sand down to the bottom of the artificial depression. But they were still straight enough southward and eastward to make the whole effect like one of a great slice cut out with a knife.

At one point a ramp had been beaten out, leading down to the floor of the depression, whose perfect level was broken only by a smaller depression a kilometre or so out—the site of the ruins.

Vlakhov guided the crawler slowly over the edge and down the ramp, and soon they were looking down at the ruins. The digging here had obviously been done by small hand instruments, and the slope down was gradual. From above, the group of stones hardly looked like ruins at all, though Custis saw that if it were assumed that the main erosion had been to the north, on the sunward side, a pattern could be imagined.

They adjusted their masks, left the crawler, and walked down. The excavation round the ruins was about fifty metres across, and the ruins themselves covered less ground still.

Custis automatically took charge.

"I can't do much today but get a few impressions," he said happily, as they circled the buildings. "I'm hoping there'll be a team over in a few days with all the equipment. Meanwhile my first impression—I'd thought it a little even from the models—is this. . . . What sort of place do you think this is?" The built-in amplifier boosted his voice till it was loud enough to be heard through the thin air and the ear-coverings.

Vlakhov looked at the half dozen small tangles of smoothly cut rock—if it was rock—which surrounded a little open space containing a smaller tangle. He walked stumpily over to the nearest block and sat on it, saying meditatively, "First you'll have to prove it is a ruin. It looks to me as if it might be natural. I've seen some very regular-looking things on the Moon—and on Earth too—that definitely weren't artificial."

"Yes, yes, of course; but assume for a moment that it isn't natural, what then?"

"What exactly do you mean? It's small. I suppose it could be the equivalent of a country house—or perhaps a temporary settlement." Vlakhov still looked puzzled.

"Yes, that's it. I wondered if you'd see it," Custis said, now speaking much more quickly, with him a sure sign of excitement. "If it's temporary it may just be an explorer's hut—possibly of an interstellar expedition. That's just one idea, of course, but we must watch out for it."

"Material evidence of that really would be exciting."

"So would the discovery of a Martian civilization," Custis retorted. They rose and walked to the centre of the hutments. The central pile of stone had a number of deep scratches, or indentations, in it. And among it there was, largely protected

from outside, the odd stone group of which it had not been possible to get more than a poor view on the stereo

They formed an interlocking pattern of cones and ovoids, gold and steel blue, which immediately reminded both men of the supposed Martian arefacts already in London.

Vlakhov pointed out, "They too are quite probably a natural form. You'd be surprised how little is known of Martian geological processes. There isn't even an acceptable general theory yet."

"Yes, but two different sorts of resemblance to artificial forms on one site is a strong argument," Custis said tentatively.

"Maybe," Vlakhov sounded discouraging "Anyhow, why do you think those cones and things are art—they might be an element of some scientific instrument of a type beyond our present knowledge."

It was Custis' turn to say, "Maybe." He went on, "But you'll admit that it's rather unlikely?"

Vlakhov shrugged his broad shoulders in a typical gesture. "Yes, I do. But, after all, do we really know that what we call art, whatever its form, is an automatic adjunct to intelligent life? Martin could answer that with a quick generalization from the latest theories, but the answer is pure speculation. Anyhow, what is art?"

He sat down again in the middle of the ancient stones Custis, who had been walking round the outside of the little 'patio,' came back and looked down at him for a second before saying rather sharply, "I thought you could tell me that. How's your beastly PACIC machine going?"

Vlakhov smiled good humouredly and answered, "Very well Incidentally you must remind me to give you, in confidence, a list of its pseudonyms."

"You mean you're driving the real artists out of the galleries and the real poets out of the magazines?"

"Y e-e-es, up to a point (I wish I could smoke a cigarette in this bloody thing) They've driven out some poets and painters, I fear."

"Really," Custis said vehemently, "so you actually admit it" He seemed carried away by the monstrousness of the idea and unable to go on.

"Yes. We've straightened out all the bugs on the machine,"

Vlakhov continued, as though there had been no interruption, "and I think it's working as well as it's going to. But one thing is noticeable—it can only produce either pure imitations or second-rate work. As I see it, it's going to drive out the hacks and phoneys, not the artists with a real gift. However narrow the gift is, the machine doesn't quite seem to get it."

"Ah!" Custis thought it over and finally remarked in a satisfied voice, "If it can produce all the second-rate, imitative and pastiche stuff, in all its variations, that seems to be a sort of roughage in our culture, then it will make human beings concentrate on the good. There'll be two definite categories. I can see it being a good thing." As he spoke, a layout for his formless idea of a Martian landscape came irrelevantly into his mind, as fresh as if on canvas.

He went on, "You know, you've really cleared up a big worry. . . . The fact is, I suppose, that creative art depends on psychological pressures. The only trouble is that society isn't producing such pressures. It's the whole question of freedom and control again."

Vlakhov rose and replied, "Yes, I know, and the psychologists have made it pretty clear that an artless society—among human beings at least—has something wrong with it. But we don't really know yet how far it's gone. If you find a hunter with suicidal tendencies you take his gun away, even if he'll starve if he can't kill game: the starvation is a less urgent problem at least and can be solved later. Before psychocontrols came society was intent on suicide."

"Well, I said you were right on the Moon last year, and I don't go back on it. But——" Custis paused and Vlakhov went on,

"We're experimenting on the production and control of the pressures you talk about—on PACIC as well as otherwise, so perhaps we'll get great art out of it yet! But at present we don't know enough: the pressures' nature isn't clear and they can't be produced or controlled as yet either in the machine or, more important to the survival and flourishing of the race, in human beings."

They walked round to the far side of the structure. There, now almost level with the sand, a sort of niche let into a corner of the wall proliferated with the metallic-looking ovoids. Custis bent down slightly to look at them. Then he straightened up

and, without saying anything, gestured to Vlakhov to do the same.

As the Director crouched down, Custis snatched the blaster from his hip, leaped back five or six metres, and rasped in a tight and muffled voice, "Turn round."

Vlakhov stood and turned. The blaster remained trained accurately, though not quite steadily, at his chest. He said, "Well?"

Custis, again in a rough and unnatural tone, said, "I am going to . . ." His expression could not be seen through his oxygen mask, but his hands, pinkish with low pressure, tightened and whitened on the butt. His whole body remained fixed and unnaturally angled, in the position his backward leap through the light gravity had landed him in. A faint breeze, doubtless drawn by the updraught of the conversion field to the south, ruffled the loosened sand between them Custis shook his gun hand slightly as though to get a firmer grip and again croaked, "I am going to . . ."

For a moment there was an impression of his leaning down on his hand and the gun, as if trying to force them forward. His trigger finger did not move.

Then, his breath hissing out under the mask, he dropped the blaster.

Vlakhov walked slowly over, picked it up and returned it to its holster Custis was still standing there, looking dazed, while the other led him to a fallen lintel and sat him down, adjusting the oxygen to his mask up slightly as he did so.

After a minute or two of heavy breathing, Custis said in a dazed tone, "I nearly killed you."

"No, of course you didn't The blaster wasn't charged How are you feeling now? I wondered how it would turn out, but it was more or less as the lab boys said," Vlakhov chattered on.

"What are you talking about? What happened?"

"What do you think happened? They gave you a compulsive last winter. They seem to have dealt them out pretty freely, in fact But yours was one we could be pretty sure of. And in the circumstances, what with your being a friend of mine, it seemed that the action they'd want would almost certainly be an assassination attempt. You were one of our few certainties, so rather than just take it off, we thought we

would play it out and see how it worked. As you see, you didn't go through with it. Now, that's pretty reassuring, because . . ."

Custis, now partly recovered, interrupted, "What on earth are you talking about? You really are a cold-blooded old swine! Politics! Your friends are just laboratory animals as far as you are concerned."

"Ah, back to normal—no, the point is that with our very small staff the result of all your pernickety pressures, I need hardly say—we cannot hope to cover a hundredth of their contacts, for a long time. There are all sorts of other problems, after all. And, anyway, it isn't easy to persuade people, particularly ex-Watchdogs, of decent character, to come in for examination. You were one case we really could watch and provoke. We need the information. What's really worrying us is that no one seems to have done anything yet."

Custis got up. "Well, if it didn't work with me, I suppose that means their plan was faulty."

"Not necessarily. After all, you have a lot of good reasons not to kill me. And incidentally, even your grabbing the blaster instead of hitting me on the head with one of those sculptures or something was a sign of your unconsciously trying to get out of it. But more likely you couldn't bear to think of scratching or denting your bloody old art forms! Anyway, my bet is that the conditioning will take in a lot of cases. However, we'll have to see what the lab says when I give them the stuff on this."

Custis strolled over to the ovoid cluster and looked at it. It seemed to provide tolerable therapy, for in a moment he was talking in exactly his old tones, "Well, just so long as you are sure all this has got it out of my system."

"Yes, it will be completely abreacted . . ."

"All I can say is I don't want to hear any more about politics for the rest of my life."

They walked towards the crawler.

"Anyway," Vlakhov went on, "it can't be insoluble. Freedom versus controls! It's probably wrongly conceived. It may turn out to be meaningless and all this pressure argument may be nonsense. But in any case, if there is a problem we've solved all our problems so far; the next generation will solve this one all right."

Both men, though nothing definite in the way of reassur-

ance was really available, were smiling and relaxed, with a feeling of general optimism, as they got into the crawler. No longer shouldering the whole sky, they drove off southwards across the brilliant Martian landscape, Custis to his investigations about its possible ancient inhabitants, or visitors from the stars, and Vlakhov for at least a refreshing look at the work being done to make the planet inhabitable, before his return to the still sputtering fuses of the conspiracy.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The starship lay on Pluto. A small escarpment stuck up from the level black wastes of hydrogen ice. A few airlocks set in the rock indicated the presence of an abandoned experimental station and observatory, now being used by the crew and those who had come to assist, or cover, the take-off. Near it lay half-a-dozen ships, of a fair size even though they had carried few people, since they had to have sufficient matter for their converters to carry them from the Inner Planets. But they were dwarfed by the huge bulk of the *Zenith* which lay beyond.

The sun, of an apparent size little larger than the point of light that shows a star, though of course very much brighter, threw its faint rays across the coldest and barrenest land in the Solar System. It did not give enough heat to melt the supremely cold substance of the planet's surface. In the whole sky there was not, nor could there be, a body showing a visible disc. The scene was almost that of the deeps of inter-stellar space.

As an engineering feat the great ship was extraordinary enough. The main work on the components of the hull had been started while the photon drive was still in embryo, and considerable lesser problems had had to be solved. In the seven-hundred-metre-long vessel, not only had enough matter to be provided to enable the drive fields to operate continuously for years, but the resources of life and relaxation for ten crewmen over decades if necessary had to be available.

A lot of these problems had indeed been solved on a smaller scale years before. The first Mars trip, back in 1976 had taken two hundred and sixty days, using the least-energy orbit. This time the journey was much longer and more doubtful, but at least the crew would not be as cramped as Jones and Sully had been in their twenty-foot cabin.

The crew had lived in the ship now for nearly a month, but it was in the station's saloon that Hayakawa was now entertaining some of his own men and women, and the journalists and base technicians who had come for the final scene before take-off.

The drinks, produced by the converter-operated still of the ship itself, were not bad.

Hayakawa was answering a few points:

"The choice was Procyon or Tau Ceti—both at about the same distance about ten and a half light years. They aren't by any means the nearest stars of course, but they are the best bets for really suitable plants under graviton-flux theory. Still, it's just a gamble And all the nearer stars will be searched within the next ten or fifteen years—there are twenty within thirteen light years.

"And then we can go further—you get more time-gain in proportion in a longer trip because the period taken to reach top speeds is the same as on the short ones."

"Beyond about twenty light years it will be taking too long though, surely?" Giles Mox of the *Telegraph*, always astonished by the most obvious speculation, asked heavily.

Hayakawa turned half away from him as he answered, "Yes, except for permanent colonies, or *from* permanent colonies by intermediate stars But when we reach that barrier we'll probably have a good suspended animation technique, the Tycho doctors were telling me. Or we might get warp-travel after all, as Ayesha thinks."

The little Arabian girl, busy writing some last-minute letter in the corner, looked up and said, "They'll have to have units at each end of the trip for that even when it's developed, so ships will have to make the first voyage."

"Conservative, that's her trouble," Hayakawa remarked.

"It will be a bit crowded won't it?" Mox went on.

"It won't be a hundredth part as crowded as some of the Bases were. Hartley told me that in one of them the atmos-

phere purifier was out of kilter in some way, and the stench was absolutely terrible!"

"But they were conditioned to it."

"If the worst comes to the worst we'll have to be, too: but the psychos are almost certain it won't be necessary."

He had been discouraged by the journalists from getting on to a platform and answering questions formally, on the grounds that that always seemed to result in a battle, partly because he and the audience were then arrayed facing each other like opponents. Moreover, only half-a-dozen had come right out to Pluto, covering the event between them for all the papers and agencies in the Inner Planets.

Ayesha looked up, said, "You'd better wind up soon, if we want to have a reasonable time to get clear."

After a brief consultation the journalists asked Hayakawa for a final short summing up, suitable for the stereocasts. They set up their recorders, posed him in front of a plaque reading, "Starship *Zenith*, christened by Mrs. Hu in orbit, April 2008," and gave him the cue to start.

He looked rather owlishly into the recorders and said:

"Procyon is now believed to have at least five planets. We can reasonably hope that there will be one or more with oxygen atmospheres and life. The journey will take about eight years for us in the ship, and the return the same. But owing to relativity effects thirty years will have passed on Earth when we return. We are a balanced crew of men and women, and if accident strands us on a Procyonic planet we should be able to start a colony, even if no relief ship was able to get to us for some time.

"When we started we expected to be virtually out of touch with the Earth for most of the trip. We could have received occasional messages, with a huge amount of power behind them, but we couldn't have replied. And anyhow, the messages themselves would have taken years on the way. But now we will be able to use the subspace stereo recently developed by Professor Manchip—you will remember the dramatic circumstances in which the first model was tried out—and we hope—we can't be certain yet—that it will keep us in touch."

He paused for breath, and a drink, and also for another look into Cecily Askerton's calm blue eyes. She had abandoned

her Watchdog views in the same logical and sensible way as she had taken them up. She still represented the *Argus*, which, now purged of its criminal connections, still took a critical view of the psychological question in general. It had no longer been inclined to attack the Government's particular security measures while the crisis was fresh, but was beginning to ask if they would not be relaxed, and soon abolished, now that the danger was over.

Cecily looked back at Hayakawa in an amused, yet respectful way, a look which in the last week he had come to value. She had indeed told him, in her usual unforthcoming voice, however, that she greatly admired the spirit and courage of the whole enterprise.

It was with a pang that he concluded in a rather muddled way, "We hope to be off tomorrow. Give the public our thanks for their support. We hope the expedition will have luck in what it finds, and really bring home something in the way of information that our friends deserve. Good bye, Solar System!"

Giles Mox, always very much the doyen of science journalists, was starting in his pompous way to toast the crew, when the speaker buzzed. "Hayakawa, this is Dr. Maclean. I've just seen Jennie Denvers. It's lucky you sent her over—she's got more than an irritated throat: her lungs are off. She won't be able to go."

"But Mac! she was supposed to have been tested!" Hayakawa bellowed appealingly.

"She was all right on Earth eight weeks ago: it's come out in space. Light cosmics do that to a few people."

"We won't have cosmics in this ship—the field will take care of them!" Hayakawa retorted.

"She must have got them at odd times: on Pluto or in a lifeboat and so on. Anyhow, she can't stand accelerations for another three months at least."

"Oh well." Hayakawa turned to the journalist and said, "I'm afraid take-off is postponed. We'll have to wait a week or more for a replacement. They wouldn't let us take reserves out, and said they were all busy, especially the biochemists like Jennie. It's all damned silly: we've got enough tapes on board and enough time to give everyone a complete course of education

in biochemistry and half-a-dozen other subjects before we reach Procyon!"

"But still," Mox said cautiously, "You'd need each person trained in one basic subject at least—to explain difficulties in the courses and to have a general scientific background or that's what the brief they gave me about your educational facilities said."

"Yes, I suppose so," said Hayakawa grudgingly. "Ayesha, look after our guests for a bit will you though I expect they'll want to radio this one off. Let them use the communicator," and he walked out with hunched shoulders toward the promenade deck.

The saloon was in the middle of the ship, with no direct view of the outside Hayakawa walked through one of the club-rooms (a little cinema, stocked with years of recordings the crew either hadn't seen or had seen and liked, together with stereos of most of the operas and plays anyone had ever thought worth seeing) Beyond that again he turned into a corridor leading through the lavish living suite of one of the crew. He wondered if all the furnishing would last out the trip; not that they weren't virtually wear-proof, but at a pinch they would have to provide fuel for the converter.

Ducking through a temporary opening where last minute repairs were being made on one of the gravinol impregnators, he emerged on to the main promenade deck.

Here, three hundred metres from the nose, a curve of transparency ran almost the whole way round the ship. The psychologists had said that it would be a good thing, and the engineering problem had not been difficult. More complicated, but interesting to solve, had been the question of adapting the protective screen which would be necessary to keep out harmful radiations and channel intersteller matter to the converters when the ship was going really fast, so that it would let in visual radiation only.

He settled himself at a window and looked gloomily out over the smooth barrens of the land and sky. Procyon was visible to the south, and not far from it a brighter star still, Sirius. He stared at them impatiently.

An unwonted mood of introspection came over him. Was the trip necessary? Was he just an unbalanced thruster? Could

it be that the whole seven-hundred-metre-long vessel was just an incredibly expensive buttress to one man's instability?

To ask the question to let the qualms out into the light of day was to answer it. He at once reassured himself: the trip was worth-while in every possible sense -he hoped the new generation wouldn't be deprived of what made it possible. And, anyhow, the psychologists who had reconstructed him had not thought him sufficiently aberrant to change him.

The only thing wrong was the moment of weakness itself. But everyone is entitled to such occasionally, Hayakawa felt. Suppress them and you get a zombie—a Bates man. He cheered up. Hearing footsteps he turned to see that Cecily had followed him and this cheered him even more.

"Hullo, my dear," he said embarrassedly, "I'm sorry I showed my disappointment so childishly. I know you don't approve."

She came up and stood beside him for a moment without answering. In the faint light her face appeared a trifle less assured than usual She looked like a young girl. The blue eyes, ordinarily emblems of clarity, seemed deeper and more troubled. He felt suddenly protective. But it was in her normal clear way that she finally spoke. "Henry, I have something to say. Please don't interrupt until I have finished. Unlike many scientific correspondents I have several doctorates, as you probably know. One is in biochemistry I want you to let me take Jennie's place on the expedition."

"What! No I'd love to have you," Hayakawa gazed, with quite changed ideas, at this astonishing woman. "But you don't understand the difficulties. . . ."

She interrupted his incoherent remarks with, "I understand perfectly well. I'm fully aware of the length of time involved, and the boredom and nostalgia we'll all certainly feel I've also seen over the ship and know how well equipped it is to deal with all that I'm not a child," she added more coldly, "and am quite capable of a considered judgment."

"How old are you?" he asked, overcome by curiosity.

"Twenty-six. I'll only be forty-two when we get back And all my contemporaries will be looking older—they'll have passed thirty years to my sixteen, if it comes to that." She paused and looked at him more fixedly, but the voice was still

cool and non-committal when she went on, "You're in love with me. Why don't you want me with you?"

This was the first mention between them of Hayakawa's feelings. He was glad of the semi-darkness which, he hoped, concealed his face as he groped for something to say. He finally blurted out, "Of course I want you to come. I just don't want to ruin your life."

"That's settled then. I'll come of my own free will and then you won't have the responsibility."

The conversation was going too fast for Hayakawa. He said nothing, and after a minute felt that his silence must mean assent. But there was one more point before his conscience was clear. "Cecily, only the crew are supposed to know this. But we have sealed orders: we're to come back via Sirius if Procyon has no life or colonizable planet, and if I consider that morale will stand it. That'll be another eight years. That's the reason they chose Procyon in the first place, and not Tau Ceti. What's more, there's less chance that the Sirian planets are usable—though there's a lot of research we could do in that system."

"All right. What's a year or two extra? And there'll be more to see."

"Cecily, I do love you. Why do you want to come on the expedition?"

She turned away and looked out across the hydrogen ice curving sharply away to the horizon, glittering under those stars which at last seemed to be within reach.

"I've become deeply impressed with the whole expedition. You really are doing something. Something rather simple, perhaps, but still useful, courageous and new. There is a spirit and unity of purpose among you that I have not met—or not met connected with anything remotely sensible or interesting in the ordinary world. However, in addition, I have begun to feel that curiosity which is so strong in all of you—the urge to see—and be the first to see—something absolutely fresh. I don't know if you've read Sully's memoirs—he was not just a rocket-jockey or a straight scientist like Jones, and he gives something of the feeling of being the first man on Mars, of seeing the new thing in its virgin novelty. . . ." She had been speaking with more warmth and excitement, and less accuracy, but now she turned and in a more ordinary voice added with a

smile, "I only read it the other day, in the ship's library, so it only confirmed my feeling, it didn't originate it."

Hayakawa's joy at this speech was intense, and marred by one thing only. He replied, "Then of course you shall come, darling But there was one omission from your enthusiasm me! Will you marry me?"

She smiled again, this time as to an impatient child, but she looked away as she said, "I won't answer yet. But I wouldn't come unless I felt it was likely that I'd succumb in the end It would be too trying having to spend sixteen years holding you off."

With a great weight off his mind he said, "Yes, you needn't answer now. There's plenty of time, as you say, and a big enough craft to woo in pleasantly.

Since we've got world enough and time,
This coyness, lady, is no crime."

"Cultured too . . ." she murmured vaguely, looking out absorbedly in the direction of the quite irrelevant constellation Perseus Happiness helped to block from his mind the idea that so incredibly fortunate an accident might not be an accident.

* * *

By dint of hard work the take-off was ready by the original schedule. Hayakawa omitted to inform Earth of the change in the crew until half-an-hour before E.T.D.

As soon as this information had gone to Headquarters, a telegram of resignation from Cecily to the *Argus* was fed into the communicator. Hayakawa had insisted on this, as he said it was contrary to all ethics to have a correspondent from only one paper on board, and the rest of the crew were forbidden to have newspaper contracts. Cecily had merely replied that she would rejoin the *Argus*, if it still existed, as soon as they returned, and since she knew how to write, her accounts were going to be much the best, even if the others went straight to the agencies.

She also sent off a series of telegrams, some business-like, but including a surprisingly emotional one to Jeanne, full of recommendations about love.

Immediately before the take-off Hayakawa and she were on the bridge, where Joe Frazer sat at the controls. With the message about Cecily on its way, but due to take five hours at light speed to reach the Earth, so that a countermanding order would come too late, he was perfectly happy about it. No one, as he pointed out, could rebuke him effectively for a long time, even for not using the sub-wave.

Cecily was looking a little thoughtful, and finally confessed that she felt she was leaving behind the deeper question of freedom.

Hayakawa answered, "We've two psychologists on board and you'll be thankful they've got all modern techniques and equipment to stop the irritations and tensions developing in 'freedom' in the years we'll be alone in each other's company. Mind you, we'll all be trained psychologists—and damned well educated in a lot of other matters when we arrive back here. Perhaps we'll be able to make a contribution to the problem then."

"Yes." She smiled at him much more warmly than had been her earlier habit.

He went on, "By the time we're back the whole question may be solved, or on its way to solution. Meanwhile it's not our pigeon. We're doing something worthwhile and our minds can be freed from that care at least."

Behind them one of the psychologists, a woman, was saying to some other member of the crew, "We're going into a much more stable epoch and do you know one reason for that? People have at last got used to the background of continual technological change. They don't unconsciously hanker after a sort of nostalgic gadget-permanence. They accept the change as a natural background to their lives. Nothing that happens or will happen can catch them completely on the wrong foot again."

"I wonder how Stahlberg's getting on with my sister?" Cecily said irrelevantly.

"Martin and Jeanne?"

"I thought they were going fine at your farewell party on Earth," she elaborated.

"Yes, by God, he only just remembered to say good-bye to me!" Hayakawa said indignantly.

"Anyhow, I'll be interested to see about it. Jeanne is one of

the new generation –only eighteen and brought up under the educational-psychological rules Stahlberg fought so gallantly to preserve."

"Don't be so damned ironic. I bet he manages her all right."

But Cecily replied calmly, "It'll be a new experience for him, I'm sure. And I wouldn't be so certain that his old techniques are adequate."

"If it comes to that," Hayakawa suggested, "you're a hard nut yourself. It's not the education that will fox him, just the Askerton aspect of the matter."

She did not answer, but gave him a look which might have meant anything.

He put his arm round under her and she did not draw away. Joe said: "Five minutes; better sit down."

* * *

At the correct moment, the boosters flared and lifted the ship at a slow acceleration until it was well clear of the planet. Then, with an intolerable brightness, comparable only to that of the hottest stars, the photon drive opened up, driving the ship on its determined course across the greatest gulf of all and, just possibly, to the greatest reward.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Cecily Askerton had been right about Stahlberg and her sister.

Hayakawa had given his farewell party, typically enough, in the entertainment building of the old central spaceport on Mount Kenya. The site had been selected in the days of atomics and boosters, as being far enough away from anywhere else to stop explosions being really dangerous, and as having a long stretch of empty sea eastwards for the boosters to drop into harmlessly. Its position near the Equator had meant that departing ships got the extra half-mile a second impetus of the world's spin—every little mile counted in those days, and even the height of the launching site, saving the push through the first five thousand metres of the atmosphere, was of some value.

It was purely habit that kept it as the main spaceport Hayakawa's selection of it for his party had presumably been out of his rather crude sense of what was fitting. Stahlberg felt that they were lucky not to have been taken round the monuments of famous pioneers that littered the place, starting with the original *Jet-Baby*, the first moonboat, now set in concrete by one of the control towers. However, all had been well, and after the rather embarrassing introduction to and congratulations on his actions in the coup from World President and Mrs Hu, he had been able to get going with Jeanne.

'Stahlberg, the Modern Man,' as a critic had once labelled

him in mildly ironic fashion, had been and still was considerably agitated by this example of a really modern girl.

It so happened, he realized, that this was the first time that an individual product of the new education, and nothing but the new education, had actually entered the personal ken of himself or any of his friends. When they were first introduced and he looked into her firm dark eyes, he at once said to himself that he was finally in contact with the real problem, the real person, the reality behind all the theorizing and struggle. All the other stuff—the fighting, too, now it was over—was just superficial, a symptom only. Here was the real thing.

He had not expected to be attracted. She looked delightful, of course, but he had rather feared a dull personality. Instead of which this easy self-possession had been as provocative of his feelings as many a temperament he had on earlier occasions tried to ride, like a bronco-busting champion in stereo's popular 'Cahoots Cowboy' historical programme.

She had nothing of the ordinariness which made so many women of his acquaintance unpalatable. He had to think that out, and his conclusion was that ordinariness is a psychological defect: temperament was presumably another, in the other direction. Just the same, it had to be admitted that Jeanne did not have quite the edge of vividness that he usually went for.

An even more extraordinary question was why had she fallen for him? For she certainly seemed to have done so.

It had been fairly obvious almost from the start. As they stood above on a little balcony, looking down over the great green rain forest kilometres below, he had felt himself rising to his greatest interests, his most extreme energy, seeking to grasp and understand, to possess—this new phenomenon, this unknown brilliance. And she had flowered to it, or so he thought. On the other hand he knew how subject he was to delusion in these matters. But since there is only one way to test the delusion, he went ahead.

And here they were in a little house on the coast near Ceuta. They had come by skimmer from Oxford, where Jeanne was at the University. She seemed to think them a more natural way of travelling. At first he had found himself treating her opinions as oracles of that newly incarnate

abstraction, the balanced mind, and he had acceded to her preference while still under this idea. But he had gradually come to realize from her conversation that others of her classmates had different preferences in such things, and had begun to consider her less of an Athena—though still a goddess, of course.

He had had the *Nereid* flown over too, and they had gone on some jet trips as well as by skimmer in the three days they had spent here already. But in fact he found he rather enjoyed the skimmer, particularly over the sea. On the way from London they had come down the Rhône Valley, stopping for picnics at Avignon and the Pont du Gard, and then straight over the Mediterranean, through the Balearics and close into the Valencian coast. The glowing coast, the glitter of the shoals of fish, the coloured sails of the boats, the texture of wave and foam made a picture he had almost forgotten. In some ways, he had to admit under Jeanne's questioning, it was better than the view from the exosphere.

Anyhow, even a skimmer can go fast when pressed.

Jeanne had been delighted at the little white house with its patio and veranda. He was sitting outside on the latter at the moment, abandoning the idea of putting the last touches to the pile of manuscript—a book on the events of the Watchdog coup—in front of him. He put his recorder down and looked through the palm trees into the bay.

Jeanne came out, trailing a delicious smell of chili con carne, and put a tray down on the stone table. Her gait, and the way her simple clothes hung, seemed as he had noticed before the result of some extraordinarily rigorous type of training. And yet there was nothing of the rather professional poise which marked such girls as he knew who moved and dressed particularly well.

"I have a feeling we ought to stay together for quite a time," she said in an interested voice, as she stirred the bowl. Down below cicadas were whirring busily.

He smiled assent. This was the sort of remark that, with previous women, he had preferred to make himself or not have made. But his usual habits seemed to be irrelevant with this near angelic, competent creature. Could it be simply because she was so very young?

Struck by a more general thought he asked, "Are there any poets among your generation?"

"Yes, several of my friends write poetry." She looked at him innocently and went on, "There's Simon, and young Tirnay, oh, dozens of them."

This was not an entirely satisfactory answer, for he did not know whether they were just little PACIC surrogates or really creative writers. He would have to read their stuff. He began to feel a little old.

"You'll never find any secret of what makes my generation tick in that sort of way," she went on, with a smile "We're quite human, as you ought to know by now. Why don't you relax?—You're not doing any more work on that book are you?"

"Not now."

"Well, clear it away and we'll see if there's anything on the stereo"; she put the little black box on the table and switched it on.

The projection cube sprang to life above it In it was Mireille, singing (the nearest word to her solar-plexus-knocking voice-effect)—a ballad in the old style called 'Mare Nubium Blues.'

"She's very beautiful, isn't she?" Jeanne remarked.

Stahlberg, well used to this sort of question, answered almost without thinking, "Oh, quite pretty, I suppose, if you like that type" though such a reply was quite unnecessary in his present case, presumably. In fact Jeanne's glance made him realize that she must have done some research into his past, knew all about it and didn't care For a moment he wondered if she'd chosen this programme on purpose, and the awful idea came that perhaps she was testing him, and more effectively than his own crude probing too.

He had better stop making remarks which might irritate her simply by their stupidity. But perhaps she would forgive him on account of his golden heart, if she could locate such a thing.

He began to feel rather irritated with Mireille's song, which described, with a wealth of controlled gesture and eye, the feelings of the mistress of a lunar prospector of the eighties on hearing that his crawler has had a fatal smash in the crater Ptolemaeus. He turned the volume down until the cube of

colour and song was a quiet background noise only the size of his fist.

Mireille's brilliance had itself been a sort of ordinariness. But what about Elvira –she had something more real about her; even though wrong and dangerous. It wasn't the danger he objected to.

He changed both the conversation and his train of thought by saying, "Jeanne, this is deliciously cooked. I've never known a girl who could cook properly, even with adjustos."

"It's more difficult with adjustos, really. You can avoid a bad meal easily, but getting a good one means using the verniers." She spoke easily and expertly.

"Don't think I'm interrogating," he asked; "I'm just interested—but what was your general curriculum at school? People tell me the strangest things about their daughters - about sex-education techniques for instance."

"Yes, we learnt Samoan techniques, and others too. But you know, surely, that the Samoans always regarded Europeans as clumsy comics in bed. This generation is going to enjoy itself a lot more." A frank smile lit up her face.

"All right. You learn sex—and cooking," he answered, wondering if she was considering taking his own defects of education in hand not in cooking either. "What about other things? Zuni and various old languages, of course, to teach you the relatively of linguistic structures. What else? How early do you start symbolic logic, for instance?"

"Eight, if I remember right."

He looked at her with respect The new generation was learning about reality in the ways he was still trying to fit himself into. Still, it was owing to the efforts of people like himself that they had such an advantage over him He felt Jeanne looking at him, amused and yet respectful, and realized that she had no feelings of superiority.

But it wasn't in the formal teaching—though that helped prevent them thinking unrealistically—that one would find the special nature of the new generation, right or wrong.

The scent of mimosa was heavy from the little garden, now that the taste of chili was wearing off. As he started to speak again, his wrist speaker said, "Mail for Mr. Stahlberg and Miss J. Askerton. Will you take a transcript."

"Just one moment. . . ."

Jeanne ran into the house and came out with a transcriber. She set its receiver to the wave-band of Stahlberg's personal, and said, "Go ahead."

The machine ticked softly for some minutes, then produced five documents.

One was a long telegram to Jeanne from Pluto. She said at once, "Oh! Cecily's going to Procyon with Hayakawa." She read on with tears in her eyes. They were still there when she looked up and smiled at Stahlberg, saying "She gives some useful advice about you, Martin."

"Is she against me?" Stahlberg asked, feeling that it would be more decent to console Jeanne about the more important matter of her sister's departure first, but unable to leave this point not cleared up.

"No—and what is more she seems to be rather in love with Professor Hayakawa, though she's a bit non-committal in a way. She's also keen to go on the trip, she makes it sound very exciting. Oh, it'll be such a long time before she's back," and the tears came again.

But a few minutes dabbing and an arm around her shoulder were sufficient. She seemed to have accepted the situation very quickly. Stahlberg privately felt that nothing more boring than the Procyon trip could possibly be imagined—except for living in a Base, perhaps. He had, like most other people, gone over the former Base, brought under its own specially fitted drive units from its position in the Asteroids and anchored in an orbit a thousand kilometres out from Earth as a sort of museum, and had found it horrifying. Reconstructed Basers had confirmed the hellishness of life in such a small space, made even partly tolerable only by compulsives. But he did not think it would be tactful to speak of these reflections to Jeanne in the circumstances.

It was interesting that Cecily had no inhibitions about advising her more balanced young sister about love. Jeanne was reading through the seven- or eight page gram again, with a fair smile. It was fortunate, for him at least, that she was taking the news so calmly. For such an event might so easily have ruined things for days with one of the emotion-happy women of his past. Stahlberg turned to his own correspondence.

There were four items. First was a complaint from *Selene*, sent by ground wire to Tycho and relayed from there, that his

latest contribution had arrived too late to go into the current number. He personally doubted if the magazine would go on much longer. The intellectual atmosphere had changed and freshened to such a degree in the months since the battle that the attitudes of such groups seemed very stale. But there would be other reviews to take his work. Perhaps Jeanne's young poets were starting them already.

The next item was a brief farewell from Hayakawa with a promise to bring a BEM back; Ayesha, the keen science-fiction fan, must have put in that reference—to extra-terrestrial Bug-Eyed Monsters.

Hayakawa's departure certainly gave food for thought. Stahlberg hoped he'd be alive—and why not?—when the *Zenith* returned. There would be a lot of general interpreting to do. The excitement of that trip ran through his mind till for a moment he almost sympathized with the idea of going on it. And he had never made love to Ayesha either. But still those long years were a bit much.

The idea of Ayesha—though not bad, not bad!—had come up automatically, but as he looked across at Jeanne, reading under the light of the veranda lamp, the other woman's outline faded and emptied in his mind.

Behind them, on the stone wall, a couple of geckos had come into the patch of lamplight, and were hunting insects. The garden scents seemed less heavy, more fragrant, on this cooling air. Jeanne's face was enough to calm and satisfy.

Stahlberg turned to the rest of his mail, two communications from Mars.

The first was a postcard from Vlakhov—a view of the surface from the Phobos weather station. It was rather blurred - probably Jeanne's tuning of the transcriber had not been to that hair-fine accuracy that is needed for pictures. On the back were half-a-dozen words of general greeting.

Custis, on the other hand, had written a long letter, mainly a long discussion of the problem of freedom. It differed in its optimism from earlier screeds on the same subject - indeed it fairly glowed with euphoria. But the succession of analytic paragraphs on the subject were as complicated and muddled as ever. Really, Stahlberg thought, it was a sort of abstract hobby, not much connected with life.

Custis had also enclosed a cutting from the *Lowell Times*,

which the transcriber had reproduced separately. It was an interview with Vlakhov running, in part:

"We must remember that the recent sensational events are not the important thing. Our day-to-day patient development of new knowledge is what matters. In fifty years this revolt will be remembered as little as the Boer War or the Yaytsev Terror. They will remember us for other things—the photon-drive, the Martian atmosphere, PACIC, research in a hundred fields, just as we remember the forties and fifties, if we think beyond superficialities, for the beginnings of mesonics, for automation, for psycho-techniques."

There was a lot more, some of it pointing out in a philosophical vein, rather unusual for Vlakhov, that the great general problems remained, far deeper set than the fighting of which they were the partial cause.

For Stahlberg a politico had no claim to provide intellectual leadership, but he had to concede that an intelligent one did produce the general platitude suitable to the situation by a kind of sorting out and averaging of feelings and views often more civilized than his own. He remembered supplying Vlakhov with some of these thoughts himself.

As he looked up, over the straits, a great sphere of mauve flame sprang into being in the direction of Gibraltar. A minute later, the thud of a great explosion reached their ears.

Stahlberg ran to the stereo. There was no response to his first switching. The Third world channel must be off the air. Turning to Second, an announcer sprang into view in the vision cube. He was saying:

". . . the shooting of President Hu seems to have been the signal for a widespread outbreak. Reports of gunfights and sabotage are still coming in. Patrol's temporary headquarters in the Mare Imbrium have been damaged by a device hidden in a food-crawler. Operational staff was not present at the time. The latest grams we have here are of the destruction of the communications centre at Gibraltar, and the killing in his home at Tromso of Mr. Andrew Sevillano, who rallied the Freedom and Vigilance League to the government's support a couple of months ago. . . . The latest from South Shetlands Hospital is that President Hu is weakening . . . Vice-President Nixon has issued the following statement: 'The situation is under control. Apart from the dastardly attack on the Presi-

dent, the incidents have been sporadic. The Special Office informs me that most of these acts have been committed by innocent men acting under post-hypnotic compulsives. They seem to be the remnants of a much larger group which had already been traced and nullified. . . . The President's assassin, Dr. Kizer, is now in the hands of the Special Office. . . . That's all on the outbreak for the moment. We will be bringing you bulletins at half-hourly intervals. Meanwhile, here is the other news: contact has been lost with the starship *Zenith* which took off from Pluto at 15732 Solar. Technicians believe that this may be the temporary effect of a resonance field produced by the photon drive itself. . . . Patrol reports the probable location of a small hostile Base on Icarus Locators picked it up as the result of an unexplained burst of multi-frequency radiation. In the Light Gravity Games at Copernicus a javelin throw of fourteen hundred metres by . . ."

Stahlberg flipped the switch and set the stereo for a half-hour timer. He turned to Jeanne and said slowly, "*Zenith!*— Jeanne, you'd better start thinking about your sister's contacts over the last month or two. Vlakhov or Macandrew will be asking for them very soon."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The explosion that wrecked the makeshift headquarters in a crater a couple of miles south of Aristillus had been premature. Vlakhov himself was still four million miles away, swinging in from Mars in the cruiser *Gunn*, and Macandrew and Peggy, with the operational staff, were down at Lhasa. As the *Gunn* changed its course and swung in towards an Earth orbit, reports of the more or less simultaneous outbreak of sabotage and assassination began to pour in.

The simultaneity was a mistake. Given a few weeks, President Hu's doctor might not have come under suspicion for arrest within hours.

But it was only when Dr. Kizer, under hypnosis, turned out to be not a compulsive assassin at all, but a genuine survivor of O'Hara's gang that Vlakhov decided to hold advanced headquarters in the *Gunn* itself, and conduct the interrogation personally in the cruiser's wardroom. This time, Dr. Kizer was under counter-compulsives—technically speaking illegally so—and this was no quick, surreptitious piece of work, but a complete, though rapid job by the Service's experts.

Ranchevski brought the doctor up to the *Gunn*. The interrogation was curious. Kizer was a lead which was going to save a lot of trouble. But he was still a little dazed, and not yet very good at producing information spontaneously without the right questions being asked.

When the First Officer led the two men from Earth into

the wardroom, Vlakhov was seated comfortably in the captain's foam chair. Otherwise, the place was undoubtedly a little spartan. But he estimated that the spin was only giving something in the nature of Moon gravity and felt that the others could well put up with centimetre-elasto for once.

A single large vision screen showed the Earth, hanging in starry darkness, Australia and the Western Pacific area shining in near-noonlight.

"Where's Schönstein?" Vlakhov asked.

Ranchevski settling himself in a far corner, replied that the psychologist would be up from the Moon almost at once.

"Will you be needing anything?" the lieutenant enquired.

"No, but you might tell someone to bring us some drinks."

As the officer nodded and went out, Vlakhov glanced at the layout of his mobile equipment set, then looked down at his notes.

"I see you have listed about one hundred compulsives given. Do you have any idea how many more there were?"

Looking heavily up from the chair in which he was huddled, Kizer raised his gaze to Vlakhov's, then answered slowly, "About the same again –that is, as far as I know."

"Why wasn't all this done during the original coup?"

"Well, this was intended as a reserve operation. And besides, they did try most of these moves during that business. They failed, that's all."

The doctor's great jaw clamped tighter and his eyebrows came down to a frown as he added, "Poor Hu was out of my reach then in Antarctica, by the purest chance."

"But what was the point of it all this time? These temporary zombies could scarcely seize power "

Kizer half-smiled and said "Do you mind if I smoke? . . . Well, if we'd had more time, I'm not even sure you're right about that. I'm now a temporary zombie myself. . . ."

"A permanent one, I hope, like me," Ranchevski put in placidly, offering the other a 'huana.

Kizer waved his hand almost pettishly, and went on, "Anyway, it was partly just revenge, though I suppose O'Hara and Co. had some sort of desperate hope that it would provoke a rebellion, or generally foul things up, and cause the fall of the Government."

"Well, yes," Vlakhov said doubtfully. "People do get a bit unrealistic when they get into that sort of politics. But O'Hara knew nothing about it. And that *is* pretty good security, I must admit."

A grey-clad spaceman came in with a couple of bottles and some glasses.

"Bourbon?"

"Thanks."

Vlakhov went on, "Still, I think there must have been something else. If they thought they'd got the photon drive, they may have meant to move one or two asteroids from the Bases —against Mars, probably. After all," he went on meditatively, "there are a few Bases left, and even a few hundred men could conceivably have seized Mars in conditions confused by assassinations and so on."

Kizer looked dubious, muttering, "Well, perhaps. But I have a vague idea in the back of my mind that there was something else. . . . How soon do I get my full memory back?" He looked up dully at the pale arch of the ceiling

Vlakhov turned to Ranchevski. "How long since they finished with him?"

"Twelve hours—and he spent the first six of those giving urgent leads."

"Yes, that will slow up the long-term stuff. Still, you ought to be fairly near back to normal by now. Not long, anyway."

The little transcriber to Vlakhov's right beeped quietly.

"Just a moment . . ."

Two messages slid out in quick succession. They were both from Giles Mox, representing the Special Office on Pluto. The first followed up Mox's report, received two hours previously, that the starship had taken off. It said, "Perhaps I should have added that a change was made in the crew at the last moment. Miss Cecily Askerton took the place of Dr. Jennie Denvers."

Vlakhov stared at it disbelievingly and then turned to the other. It was timed two hours later, but labelled MOST URGENT: "I have just discovered a six-hour hypnin-seeper, still slightly active. Built in to the take-off timer. Presumably under its influence, we failed to think it odd that (a) Denvers got ill and (b) Hayakawa took Askerton as replacement. Further report follows."

Without a word, Vlakhov passed the messages over to Kizer.

"Jennie Denvers . . ." the doctor muttered. Memory almost visibly seemed to explode inside him. "Yes, we'd thought of trying to get at her with a compulsive. But you'd certainly have checked."

"Yes, of course."

"But a colleague of mine, Dr. Hamilton," Kizer went on with increasing conviction and excitement, "put a slow virus capsule in her lung during check-up. He wasn't even under compulsive himself—it was given to him as a haem fortifier. Oh dear, how frightful!" He added, more calmly, "It was quite a good plan. Cecily Askerton was under compulsive, of course, but the whole of the rest of it was so nearly natural that a barely detectable hypnin trickle would be enough to damp down everybody's suspicions just that little necessary amount."

Vlakhov looked at him for a moment, and then said quietly, "Giles isn't much of an operative, anyway, I am afraid."

"Oh, I don't know. It was clever to think of hypnin when the doubts started arising."

Vlakhov spoke into the desk communicator: "Tell Macandrew to send all material on Cecily Askerton, and her contacts, full psychoprofiles of the *Zenith* crew, all other relevant material—he'll know what I want. You're getting this conversation all right?"

A voice answered, "Yes."

He leant back, tapping the top of the transcriber with his fingernails for a minute or so. Almost at once it started chattering out a series of documents. He let them pile up, and said meditatively, "So, leaving aside the unlikelihood of the surviving Bases being able to do anything, particularly as they haven't got the drive after all, we can take it that the present outburst was timed as a diversion for an attempt to seize the starship."

The doctor bit his lip and said, "That's my impression . . . What can we do to stop it?"

Vlakhov leant back and said, "In that sense, nothing. They can't be caught. It looks as if they're out of communication at least until they cut the drive, and then how would we

know what the messages really cover? The only action is that we must send the next starship after them, instead of to Tau Ceti as planned. In fact, I'll recommend building at least three more in the next year With luck, we'll be able to get bigger acceleration and might even anticipate them. We can't stop them changing their course—or check on it, providing they don't report. Still, we can cover all the nearer stars within the next ten years or so and that would scarcely give them time to breed or build much."

There was a thump, followed by a series of lighter reverberations. Vlakhov gripped his seat automatically. The light boat with Schonstein must have come alongside. He awaited the slight thrust as the *Gunn* made its compensating vector. It came, barely perceptible, just as the little psychologist bustled into the wardroom.

Vlakhov brought him up to date, and handed him the bulk of the papers the transcriber had been producing.

After a few minutes, Kizer said, "You're taking all this very seriously."

Vlakhov said, in a cautious voice, "Not necessarily. Just being thorough. Wait till Schonstein here has had a chance to think it over."

The psychologist, who had been meditating in rather a popeyed way over the papers before him, now looked up and put in, "There are limitations on compulsives, as you know."

Dr. Kizer said drily, "I haven't noticed them."

"No, no Yours are conscious and recognized and, I may say, based on a good deal of gross manipulation. We are talking of unconscious conditioning, a far less sturdy thing. . . . But let me have another look at all this stuff." Schönstein went back to his material and started making notes.

The doctor said, "Well, of course, I know. And any help I can give you're welcome to—though it does seem a trifle odd that a keen Watchdog, now psycho'd to the other side, should beat his brains out to help the Government stop what they suspect is a loyal person psycho'd into plotting! Well, such are the ironies of the compulsive In my present capacity at least, I sincerely hope that compulsives don't get out of hand, as they would have done with O'Hara and Co."

Vlakhov looked at him briefly. He wondered why he felt, at

some barely conscious level, so uneasy about Kizer's affable co-operation. It was not so much, he decided, because it was out of accord with the other's previous convictions as that it did not suit his whole earlier personality style. Forced co-operation was one thing; but how far did it go down into the basic life attitudes? They simply had to have this collaboration; yet it was disquieting to think of actually softening or undermining this granite monolith of a psyche.

Kiser gazed at him steadily, a pleasant smile rather incongruously filling in between his hawklike nose and underslung jaw. "You are worried, a little, about my present behaviour. That does you credit. But although I don't know how this would apply to another type of character, or the results of a less hurried type of treatment—in my case, I have not lost insight." He paused and turned to Schonstein.

The little psychologist said slowly, "Yes, . . . yes, . . . I was thinking your case would be very interesting. Will you come up to the Moon later?"

"Certainly. My personal demands are quite simple. I want complete erasure of the compulsive, but, at the same time, I'd like your technicians to remove the evident blockage I've built up against rational arguments from other people's viewpoints."

Ranchevski said, "You know, I'm perfectly happy with *my* compulsive."

Schonstein shrugged his shoulders quizzically, and answered, "That's how it is. People are different. And compulsives are different, too, for that matter. . . . Meanwhile, we have more urgent business."

Vlakhov exclaimed, "A good thing, too! All this stuff confuses and worries me, I must admit. . . ."

"Not too much!" Schonstein put in.

"No, not too much, only because I don't have time to think about it too much. Liberty!" He looked at the other three, a little irritated to see the identical look of amused tolerance on all their faces. "Are you ready with any conclusions, Jeremy?" he said in a more official tone.

Schonstein said, "Give me a couple of minutes."

Silence fell. The slightly claustrophobic feeling never quite absent from a spaceship closed in on them. The rustle of the

air circulators, the hum of more distant machinery, hung in the room.

Vlakhov looked slowly at the battle shield set in the curving outer wall.

Patrolship GUNN
launched by Thompson Gunn, O.M., Sausalito Field,
June 1st 1993
Ceres Expedition, 1994; Titan 1997;
Second Ceres 1998: Trojans 2001;
Earth-Moon 2007; Main Base 2007
Four-converter monatomic, nine laser light cruiser

Below it he read the ship's motto, taken from the works of its sponsor:

"The rational man is poised, to break, to build."

But now the plump psychologist slowly laid down the file he had been studying, put his elbows on the table, and clasped his hands under his chin. He looked calm and sanguine as he addressed Vlakhov, "You want a really firm opinion already? That's optimistic."

"Now, none of that. I noticed you coming to conclusions a couple of minutes ago."

"A practical psychologist!"

"Well, yes. You're lucky in a way that I can give a fairly certain sketch of what the final report must say On the other hand, that is only because the conclusions are inconclusive!"

Kizer put in, "There is one biological point which might be considered first It would affect all your plans."

The other two looked at him enquiringly.

"Assuming the worst!" the ex-plotter went on. "Mind you, I am not clear of the details myself. But there have been forced-breeding experiments on animals recently—at Palermo, for example –which makes it look as if there is a theoretical possibility, anyway, of trouble. Look at it this way. Six men and six women land on a Procyonic planet and produce, by chain-twinning of every fertilized ovum, five or ten thousand viable embryos. They bring them to usable adulthood in two or three years. In another two or three they build enough equip-

ment to defend the planet against anything you can send at them for a long time yet. And in another decade or so . . ."

Vlakhov rubbed his chin. After a moment, he said, "Some such notion had been at the back of my mind. Offhand, I'd say that they wouldn't have, or easily be able to make, the equipment. I'd also think that even assuming that they were all under compulsives in a general way, it would take much stronger ones than seem to have been employed in this operation to put through such a long and unnatural strain. And I'm virtually certain that the time element would anyhow be much more favourable than you think. It would take decades rather than years even to reach that first stage. . . . However . . . Monitor!" he added, in a different tone.

The desk speaker said, "Sir?"

"Beam that last piece to Macandrew immediately and tell him to get on to the Palermo people for a quick answer, to be followed by a fuller report later."

"Roger."

Vlakhov turned back to Schonstein, saying, "Well, we have to cover everything, but it does seem to me that we are going beyond all likelihood. The real point is the psychological one. What were you going to say?"

The psychologist, who had been beaming placidly through the last interchange, answered, firmly enough, "It is most unlikely that a subliminal compulsive, of the type that must have been used on Miss Askerton, would be adequate to impel her to take over the ship. She could not in any case do so physically, but would have to use compulsives herself. I think if she started to use them on Hayakawa, the conflicts in her would break her out of the whole thing—as with John Custis."

"Well, yes, but that was killing a bit more drastic, I should have thought."

"No. She is as keen on integrity as he is on not killing people. . . . Anyway, it would take her time to learn compulsive techniques, set up the instruments, and so on. As soon as they come out of the hypnin, Li and Etcheverria will begin to suspect the whole set-up—as even your untrained Mox did. They're both excellent men. You may say that they could have a hypnin-seeper or so on the ship. But I am sure that your

ordinary precautions would make it impossible to put in enough to last for more than a day or two at the most."

Vlakhov picked up a sheet from his folder. "Mox says he thinks it practically impossible. Through all other stages it seems security is perfectly adequate to be sure that seepers could not have been planted earlier. Unfortunately, there is one slight loophole. The converters of the air-re-circulators might just possibly have been adjusted to giving a slight proportion of hypnin if anyone skilled enough could have got at the mechanism to make it switch to that after a given time interval. It is most unlikely that it would have been possible. And the haste and amateurishness of so much of the plot is some sort of argument against it. . . ."

The transcriber began to chatter again. Vlakhov looked down for a minute and said, "Preliminary conversation with Palermo. They say the breeding notion is highly improbable. No experimentation has yet been done on human gametes, etc., etc., etc. Once again, it is all 'highly unlikely' rather than 'impossible', which it is my duty to prefer. . . . Well, Jeremy, you're fairly sure that no commission of psychologists' final report is going to be much different from what you have said?"

"Yes."

Vlakhov leant back in his chair and said in a stubborn tone, "Nothing ever seems to end. Leaving aside that breeding, for now at any rate, they could hide for a hundred years in some asteroid belt out there. . . ."

Schönstein leant forward reassuringly. "It's almost certain that by now everything on board the ship is back to normal, that Miss Askerton has pulled out, and that they are proceeding happily to their destination!"

"There is also a good chance they'll never get there. We don't know quite what the dangers are out among the stars," Vlakhov muttered.

Dr. Kizer got to his feet and said, "Well, I have to report to the ship's doctor for further drugs, unless you need me any more at the moment?"

"No, thank you very much, doctor. Ranchevski will go over the whole business with you later, if that is all right. Guard!"

The door opened.

"Take Dr. Kizer to your M.O. You know what drugs you want?"

"Yes."

"Well, good-bye."

The door closed. Vlukhov still looked a little weary. Schonstein again said, "Don't worry, it's a hundred to one against any trouble."

"Horses often win at a hundred to one."

"I was speaking roughly. The odds must be a thousand to one at least."

"Yes, they don't very often win at a thousand to one."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Jeanne had proved a good hostess. As she went into the kitchen of the little autotel on Aegina where this phase of the interrupted quasi-honeymoon was taking place, Vlakhov said, "You should go to Mars again some time."

Stahlberg said, "I will."

"Oh, by the way, I'd better give you, in confidence, the story of John's attempt on my life." Vlakhov related the circumstances. Stahlberg poured himself another glass of madeira.

"Well, if I see him, I won't mention it unless he does. . . . It must have been funny in its way."

"Yes, but don't laugh at him. He wouldn't like that."

"Of course not . . . how are things in general?"

"Oh . . . I'm glad to get down to a quiet and private evening, and I'd hoped to spend my time congratulating you and Jeanne . . . a nice change from her sister, I must say. Not that I've anything against Cecily, but she has caused us a lot of worry."

"Mmm."

"But I think everything is over for now. It had better be. For one thing, Patrol is down to a handful of ships. *Larkin* got badly holed tackling the Icarus base. They couldn't spare a heavy. I'd taken a couple of them out of service, to see if we couldn't install a photon drive in time to try and catch up with *Zenith*."

"How did it go?"

"Bugs all the time. I'd hoped for fifty-per-cent efficiency, to be made up for by much tougher running. But it's most unlikely that we'll get anywhere – just another of those loose ends, I'm afraid – if we'd had the ships deployed far enough out we could have caught them even on conventional."

Jeanne came back with a basket of grapes. She sat down, leant forward and said to Vlakhov, "Lorimer, what about the *Zenith* and Cecily?"

"It's nice of you to wait till I'm fed."

"Well?"

Vlakhov answered, with a tired gesture, "It's probably perfectly all right . . I'll tell you what, I'll send you our Situation Estimate, very much in confidence." He smiled and added, "Honestly, you'll find it highly optimistic even if not a hundred-per-cent sure. We'll just have to live with it until we find out for certain. And that'll be a long time yet. There's never any final happy ending, it seems to me."

Stahlberg picked at a grape and said, "But when that's settled, things will be reasonably all right, won't they?"

Vlakhov paused uncertainly for a moment, and then exclaimed, "You shouldn't ask me. Remember, I am supposed to be the practical, short term man. There's enough of that to keep me busy, I must say. But even if this cycle did finish, there'd be another set of problems, surely? What are we to make of Dr. Kizer and free will, and all that?—It's true that John Custis has been through it himself, and it doesn't seem to have affected his opinions really . . ." He trailed off, stubbing a short 'huana out on the tray. He looked a trifle drawn and unhappy as he got up, thanked Jeanne for the meal, and strolled down to the little orbiter painted an official red which was to take him back to Lhasa.

Stahlberg savoured the evening, and decided to go up on the roof. He rose. Down in a field to the right the *Nereid* stood up, tall and silvery, almost hidden by a line of poplars.

The sea had been a little stormy during the day, so instead of going for a sail they had jetted over to the Pyrenees, getting in a little skiing at Font Romeu and back for dinner.

He had hardly got on to the roof – itself a sort of balcony looking over the sea – when Jeanne came up. She looked at him in a way which he would have thought possessive with most women and resented. Indeed it was the sort of thing that

started him preparing his escape routes But with Jeanne it was fused into something less parasitical—more human, he surprised himself by thinking.

She said, "It's quite smooth again. I was thinking of going down to the Aghia Marina for a swim. Or walk up to see the Aphaea Temple in moonLight. But I'm too tired now. . . . Yes, we'll have to live with it." And she lay back on the great couch.

He sat down beside her and put his arm lightly round her shoulder. She was already asleep, stirring as little as the soft and freshened air. The sun, and the colour of the day, had long sunk under the residual waves.

Stahlberg reflected again that the problem of freedom did not bother the pragmatic Hayakawa at all, was an abstract introspection to Custis, and even to Vlakhov only presented itself in general terms. He himself, however, and he alone, was meeting it directly: Jeanne was the reality of the problem.

His fingers were on the smooth fresh skin of her arm, pressed to it closer as she breathed. She lay there, warm, sweet-smelling, desirable, a real young woman, like the others.

But one does not seek a woman only, or mainly, for the qualities she retains when unconscious except in so far as they are inseparable from her waking personality. What was Jeanne like? What made her so very desirable?

Dark hair, high cheekbones, golden-brown eyes, a poised young figure, went with a calm not like that of her older sister Cecily, who had introduced them at Hayakawa's farewell party. Cecily's balanced coolness seemed to some extent a settled habit, perhaps even a little defensive, a little unwilling to commit her emotions to the rough world. But Jeanne was capable of warmth and of pleasure.

He had ridden the *Nereid* hard on the trip to Font Romeu, and on the return had brought her down almost too fast to one of his landings in the bay. They had gone down several metres into the water, almost far enough to touch bottom. All this was, he imagined, an unconscious attempt to stir her up. But she had been completely calm the whole time: nor had she shown any reaction afterwards.

Was even her warmth more than a rather unextraordinary naturalness?

The Moon had risen, in half-phase. Stahlberg's thoughts

changed as he watched it and saw in the dark half, as an observer fifty years before would not have, the scattered lights of the lunar settlements. Brightest, in the middle of the southern hemisphere, was Tycho. He realized that Elvira Jones was still there, under observation after readjustment on what had been a virtually compulsory basis.

He felt the qualms of a sense of loss. To his surprise he recognized a sort of jealousy—jealousy of the society which had taken from Elvira the particular dangerous and passionate charm he so much loved.

The bay was now completely calm.

It occurred to Stahlberg that Jeanne had performed one not entirely balanced action—in falling for him. Not falling in love in general, but for him in particular, that is.

Could it be for his looks only? That would be more or less rational, and perhaps in accord with psychological balance. It was a flattering idea, and Stahlberg admitted to himself that he was looking his best these days—he had finally, on mature consideration, had the redlines removed from his cheeks as well as his nose. But, for the first time in such situations, he found himself rather irritated at the notion. The more he thought of it the sillier it seemed. There were dozens of men just as good-looking as himself, and many a lot more so, who would have welcomed an affair with this beautiful creature. No, it must have been a deeper matter, and one with more fantasy to it. She must have liked his reputation, and his jet-driving, and his whole non-disinfested psychology. She had been entertaining and charming, even if in that rather calm way. It was the sort of charm which can only operate when it is mutual.

Perhaps there was some touch of colour missing from her, but he couldn't place it and it didn't seem to amount to much. Yet the pang of Elvira was not quite extinct.

The girl stirred beside him, and her ambience took over—that of a young woman brought up in the allegedly soul-destroying way, but still vivid and desirable, and at the same time not a threat to herself and others. It might turn out later that what was missing was a vital ingredient. It might be as absolutely necessary, as it was desirable, for that extra vividity of the dangerous to be added. But that was a question for the researcher for the future. The here-and-now was good

enough: and that fact in itself was a hopeful symptom for that future.

Deep in his heart was the knowledge that the problem might rise up again in some very refractory form, and that there might be no solution. That all problems must have solutions was a common fallacy, even now. But makeshifts have been known to work temporarily. And, anyhow, the present never has adequate data to judge a long-term problem—it can only see a little way.

Meanwhile he felt the world, in all senses, concentrated on Jeanne. It was concentration of the sort that finds its speech in poetry, that art which is a fusion of statement, emotion and the beat of the senses, in a single calm flame.

The Moon's track gleamed on the calm bay. The words of an old poet became oracular in Stahlberg's head, and speaking for the first time for nearly an hour he said, keeping his voice low to avoid waking Jeanne:

"And across the mollified waters the pathways of gold grow firm."

Then his gaze shifted to Procyon, to the direction in which the Zenith was heading faster and faster every instant, with its cargo of unknowns. And beyond it to the endless unknowns, menacing and promising, of the whole star-ridden universe.

And freedom?

In a sleepy voice he made a correction, "Well, fairly firm."

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